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(54) SYSTEMS AND METHODS FOR FREEZING, STORING AND THAWING BIOPHARMACEUTICAL MATERIALS

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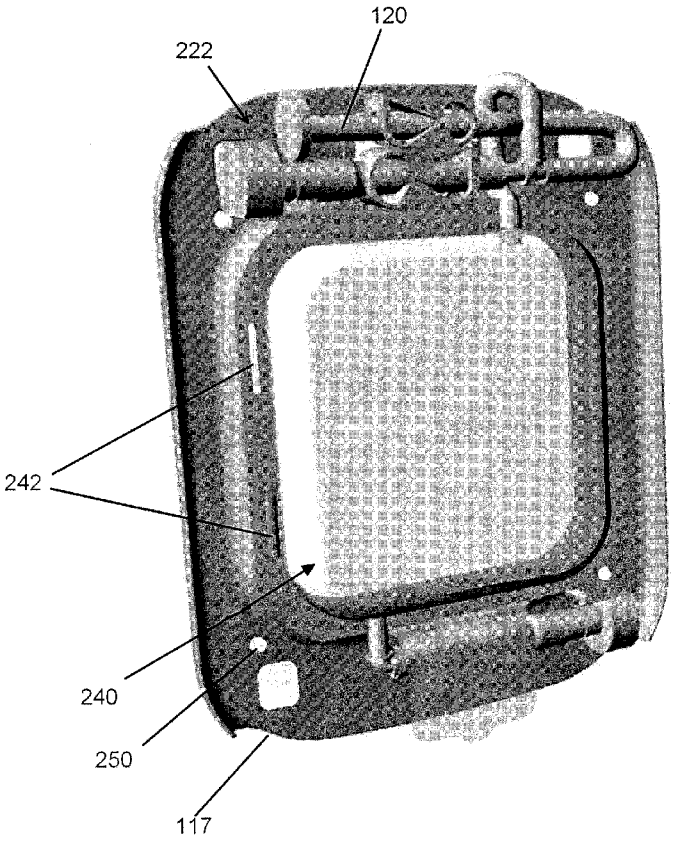
(52) **U.S. Cl.** **62/66**

(57) **ABSTRACT**

A system for use in freezing, storing and thawing biopharmaceutical materials includes a flexible sterile container means for holding biopharmaceutical material therein and a holder more rigid than said container means. The container means is received in a cavity of the holder and the holder extends along a perimeter of the container means. The holder is fixedly connected to the container means. The holder includes opposing sides defining an opening and the container means extends between the opposing sides of the holder defining the opening. The container means includes a substantially smooth exterior surface extending between the opposing sides.



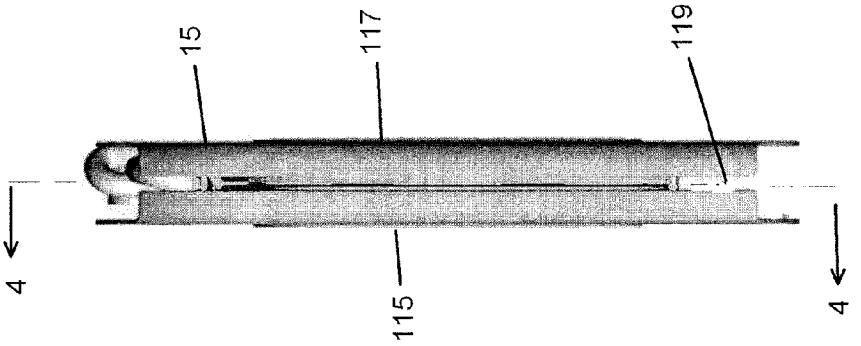


FIG. 2

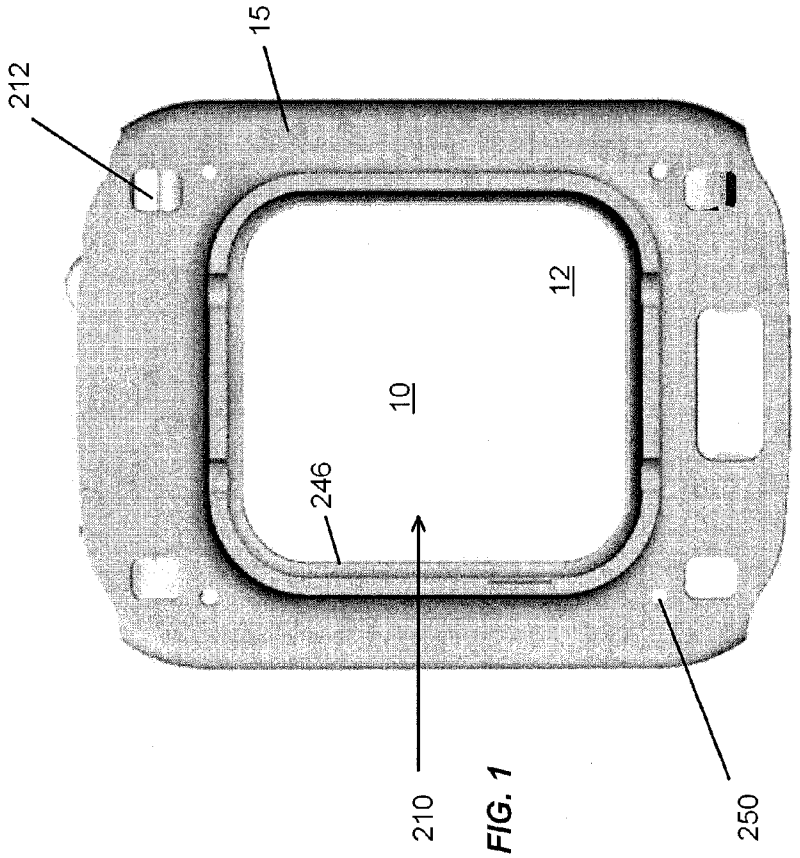


FIG. 1

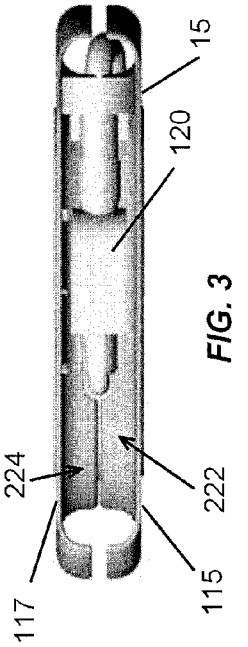


FIG. 3

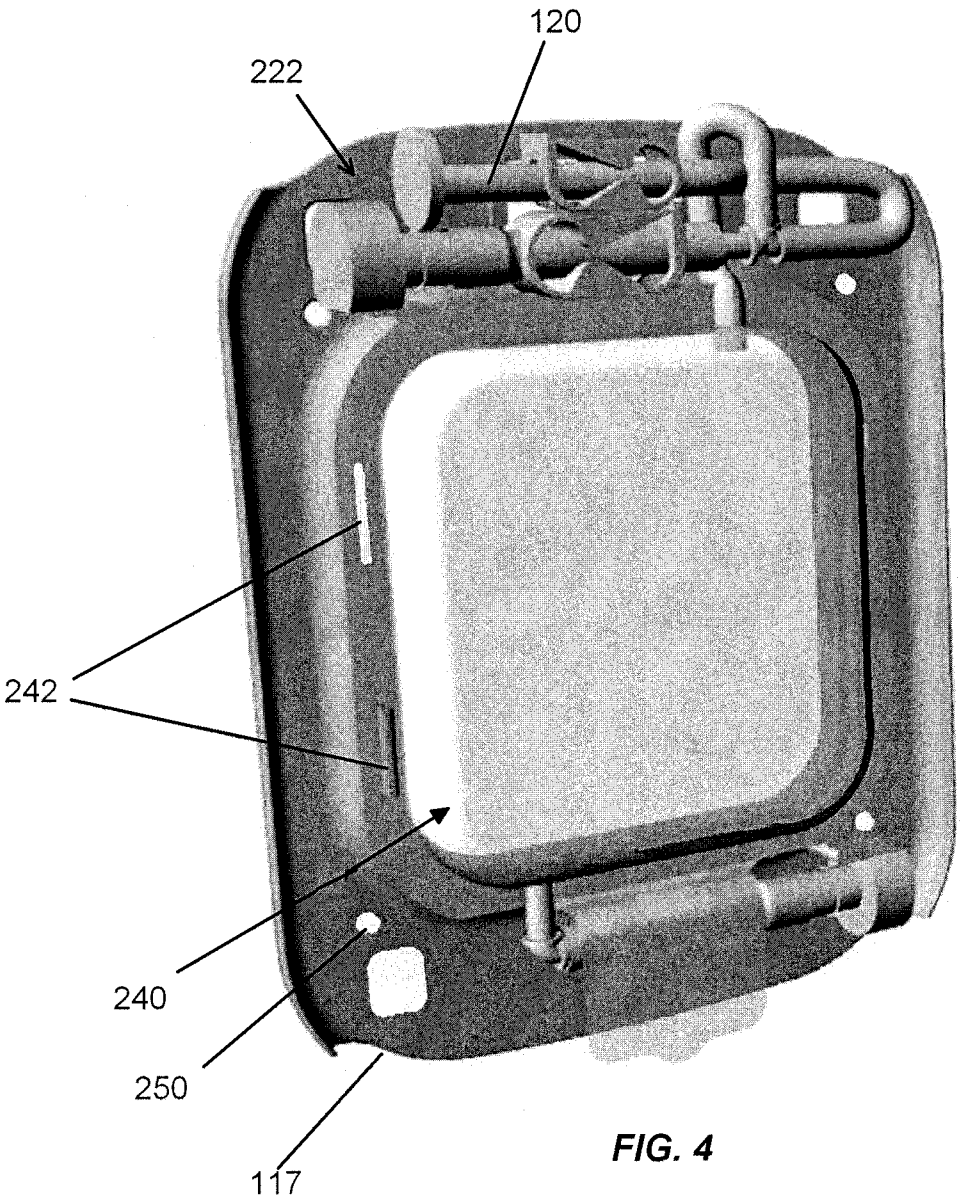


FIG. 4

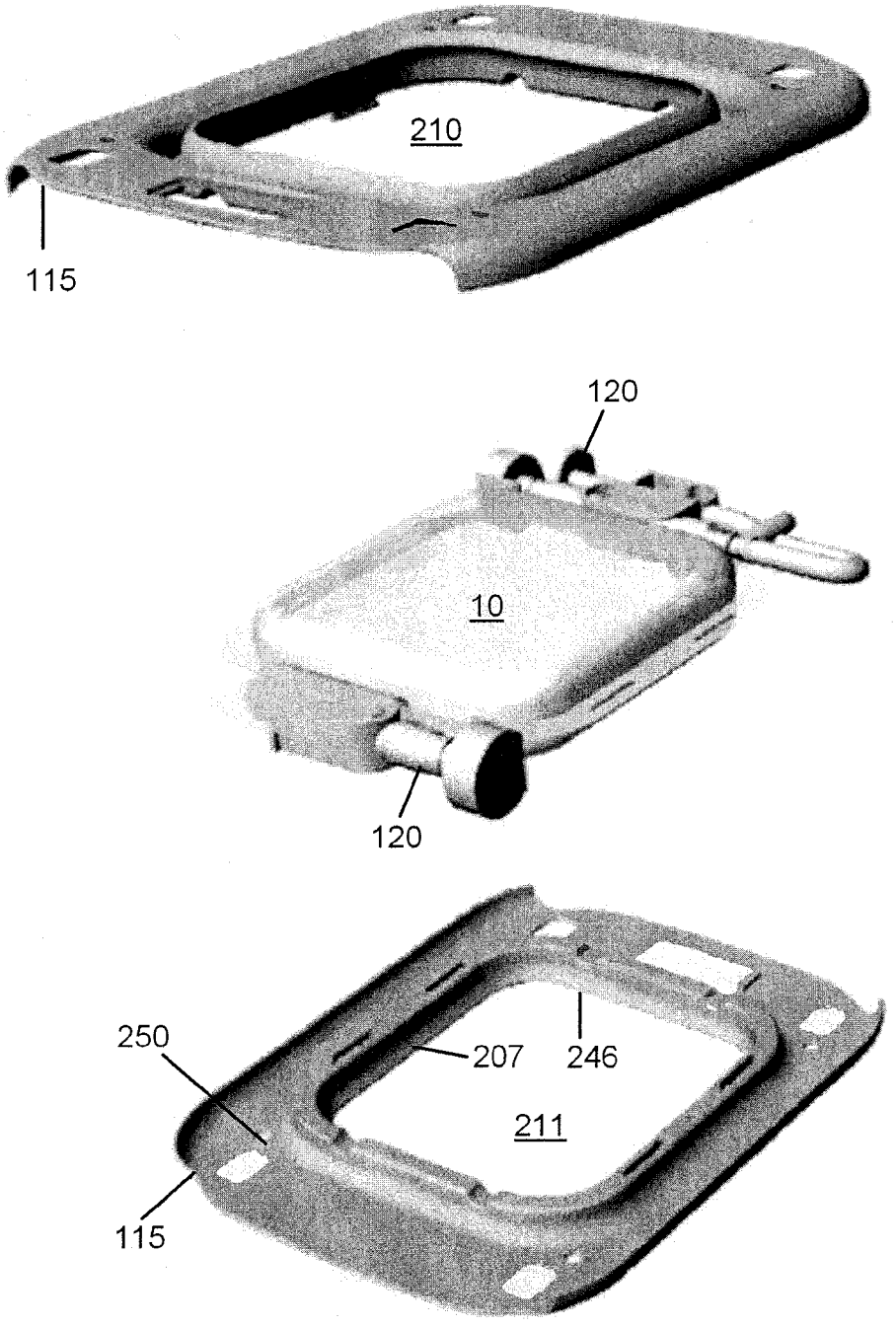


FIG. 5

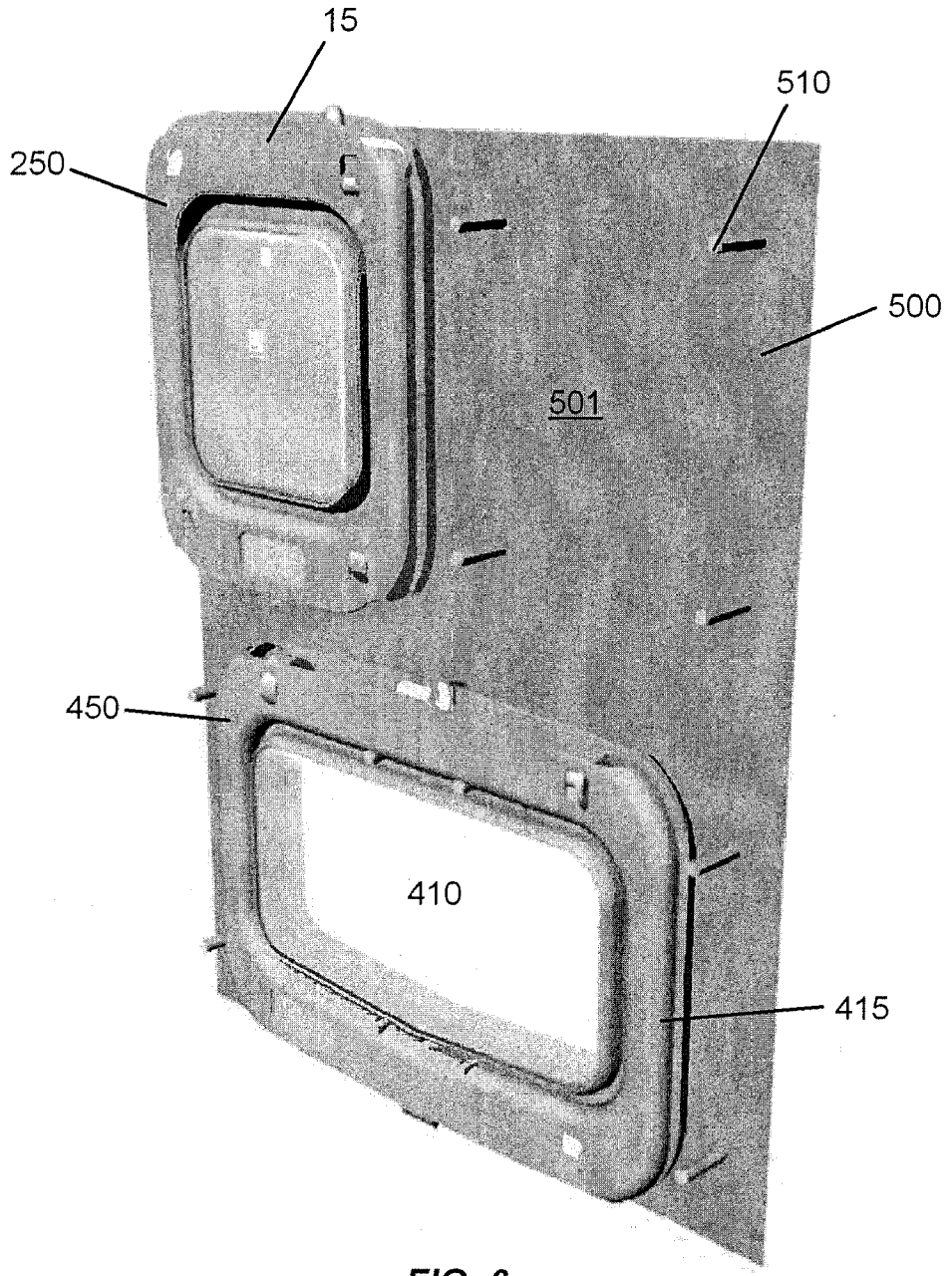


FIG. 6

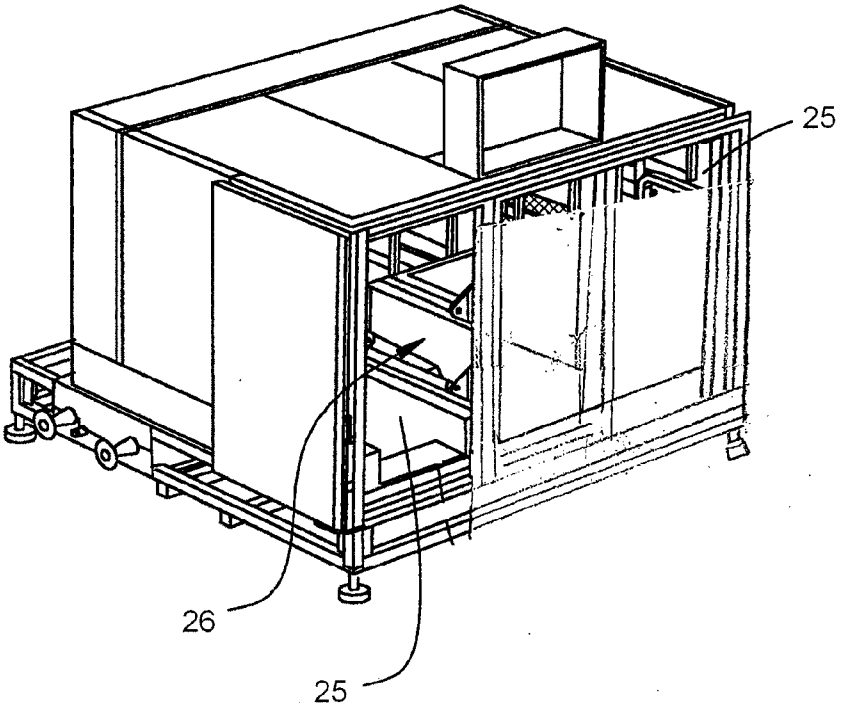


FIG. 7

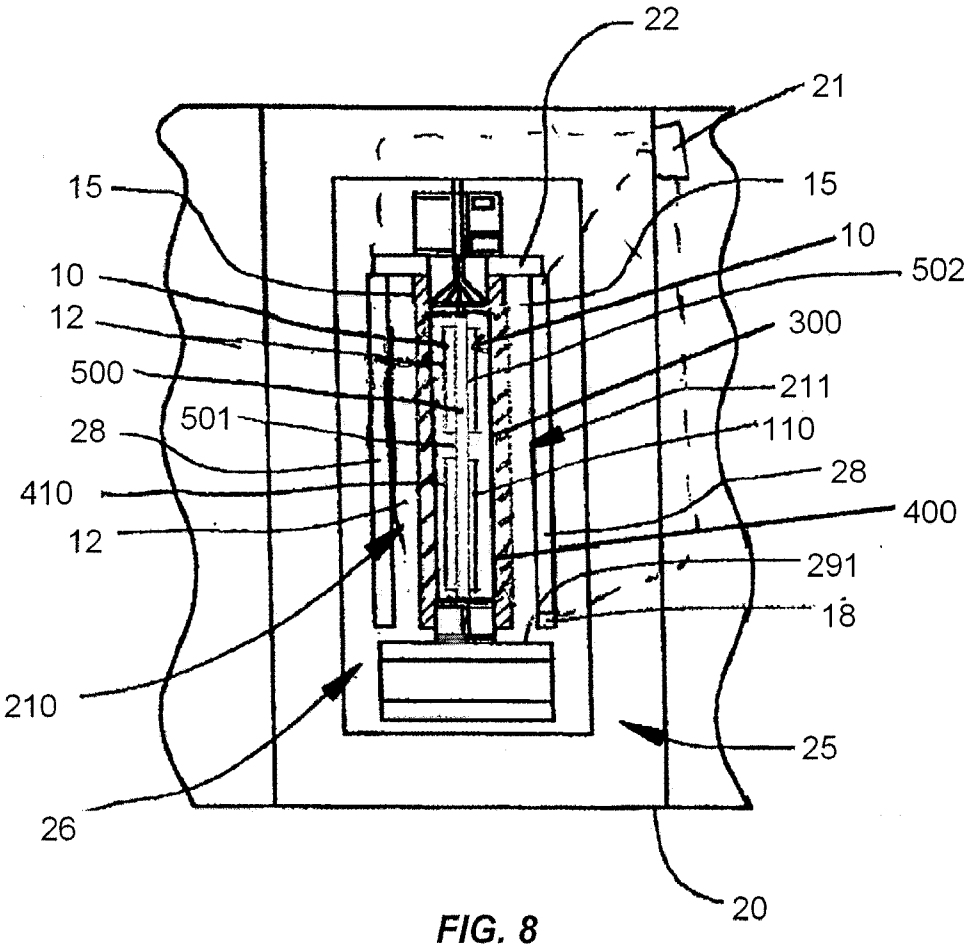

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FIG. 8

FIG. 11

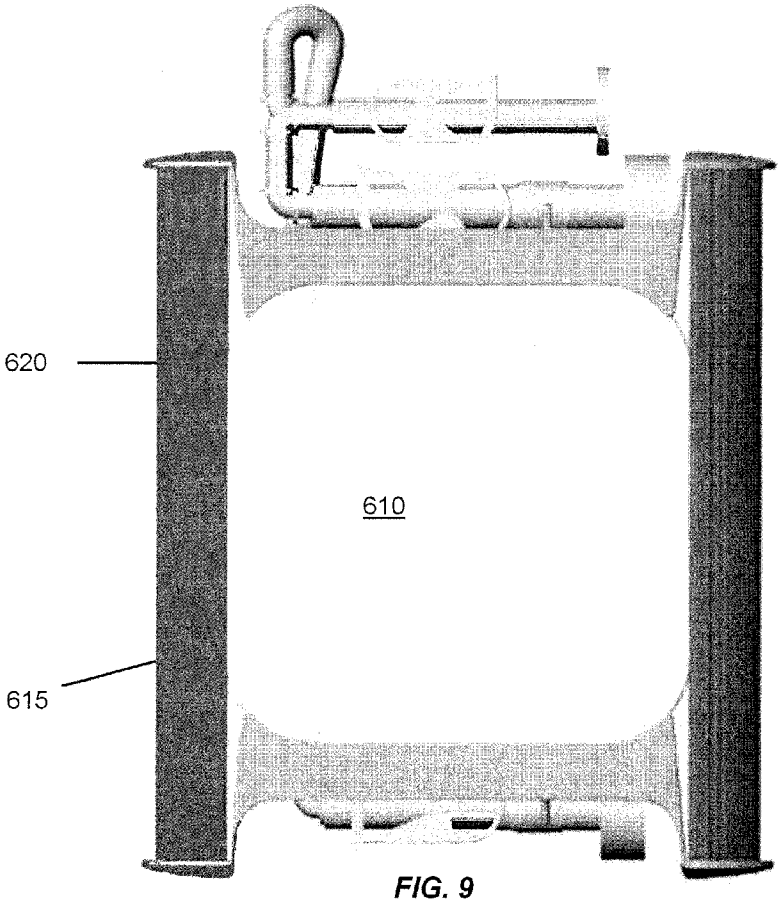

FIG. 9

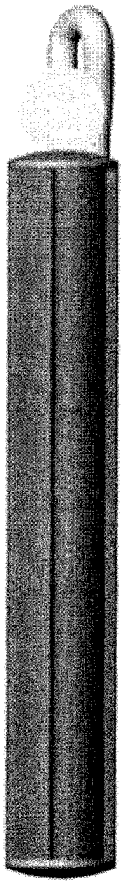

FIG. 10

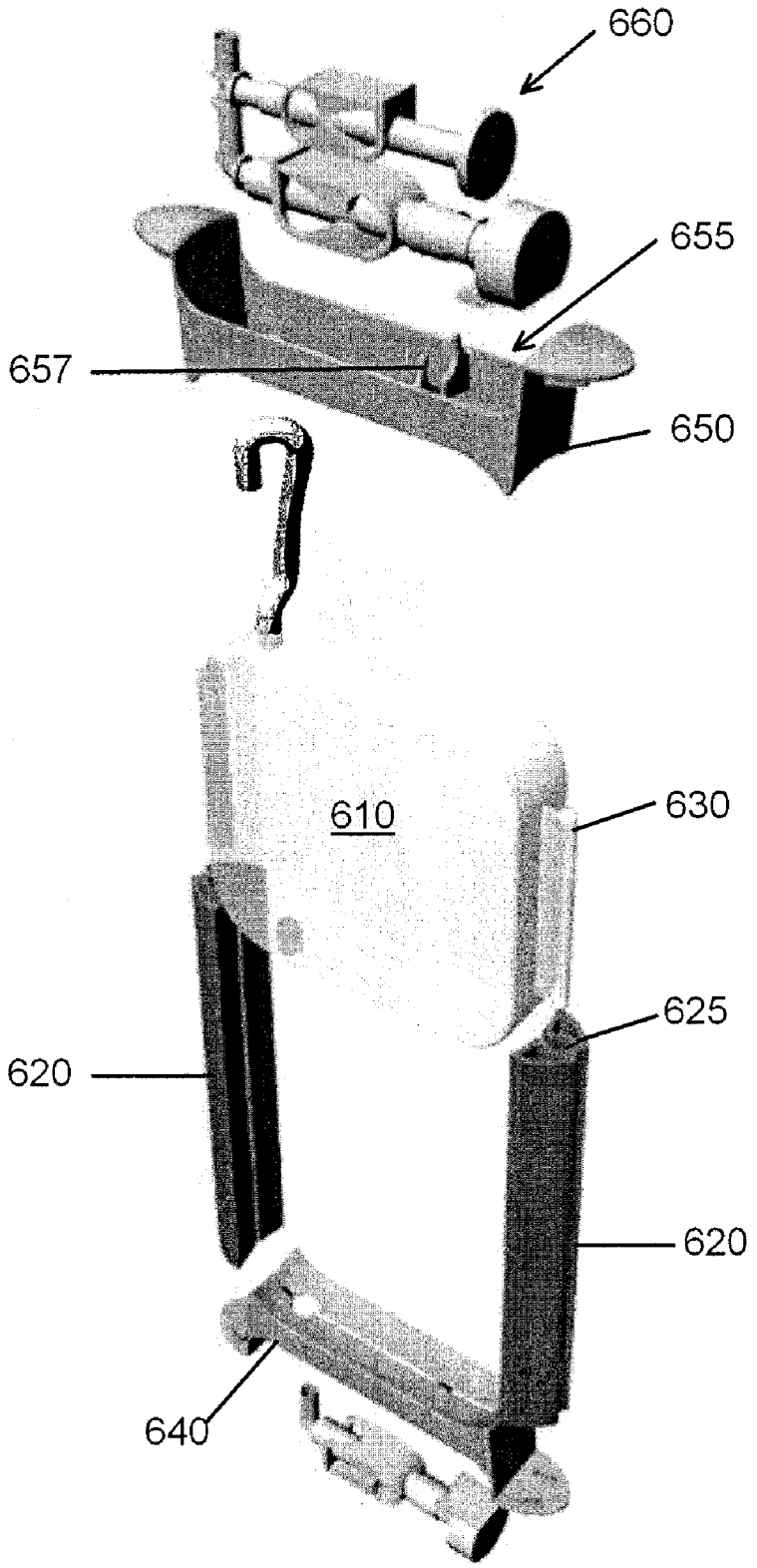

FIG. 12

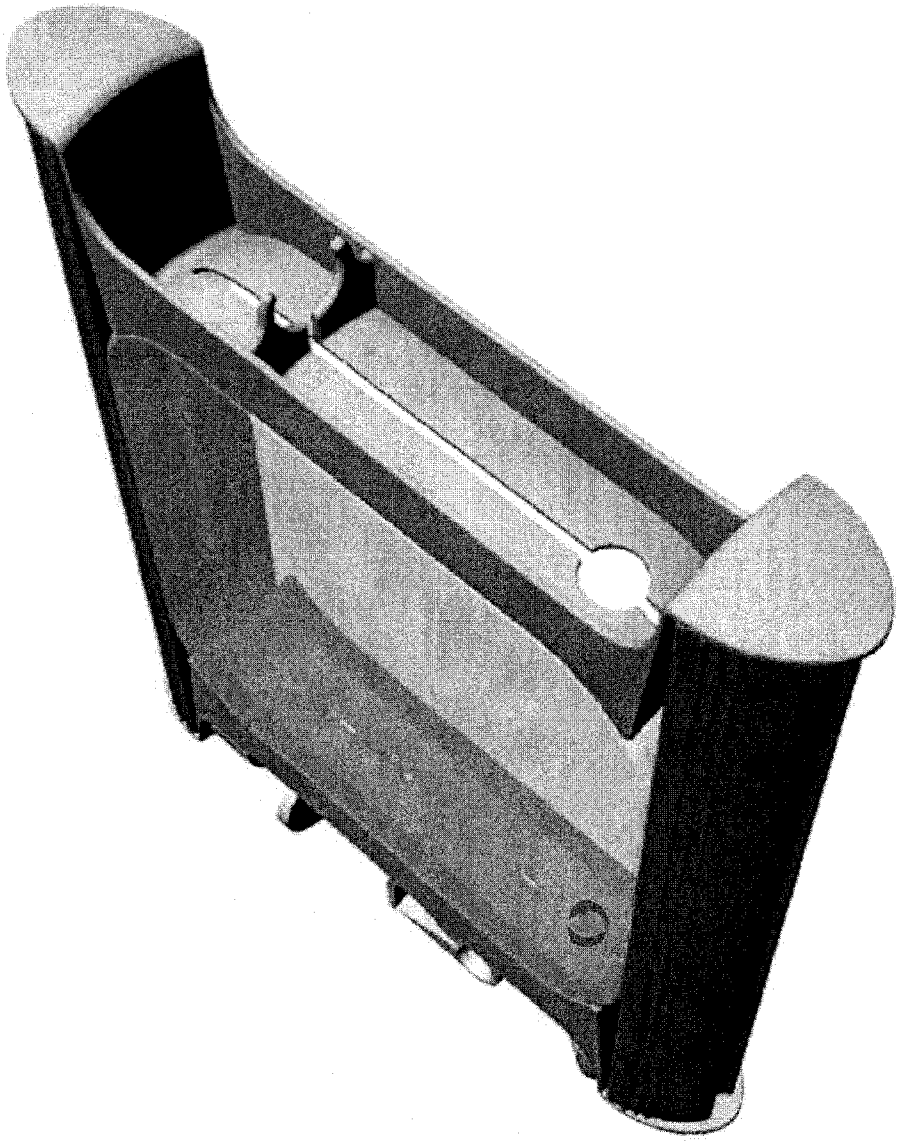

FIG. 13

FIG. 16

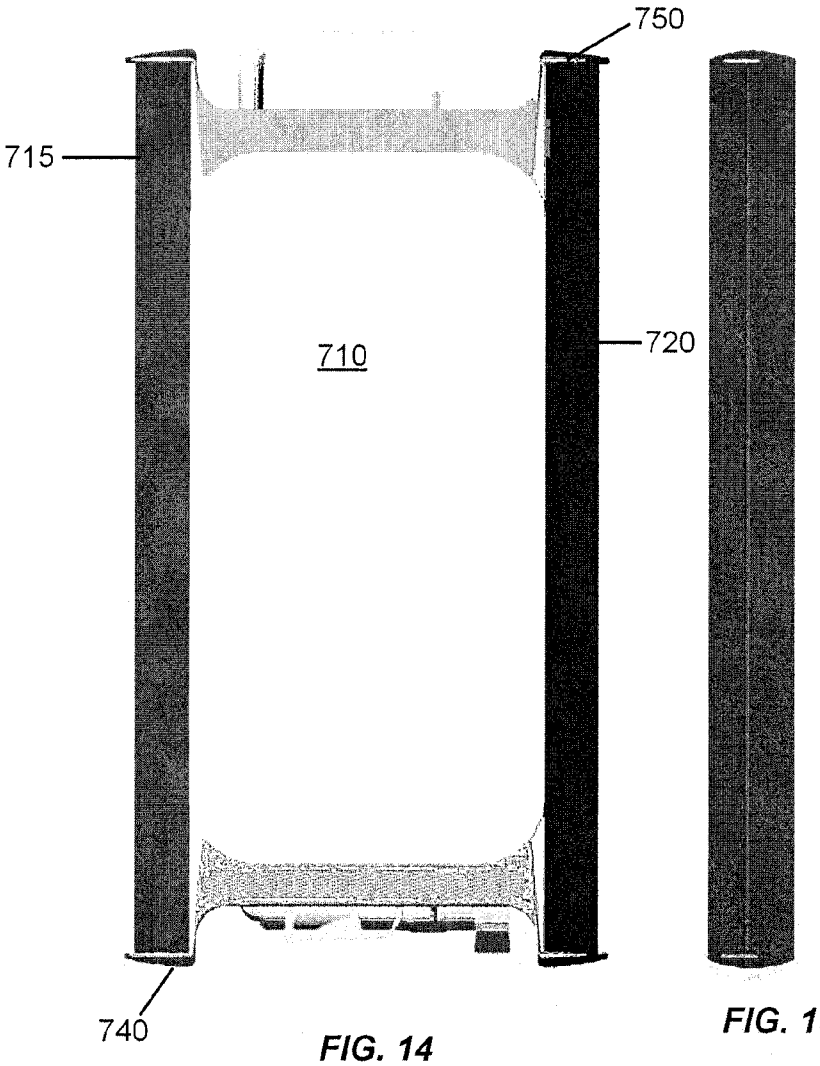

FIG. 14

FIG. 15

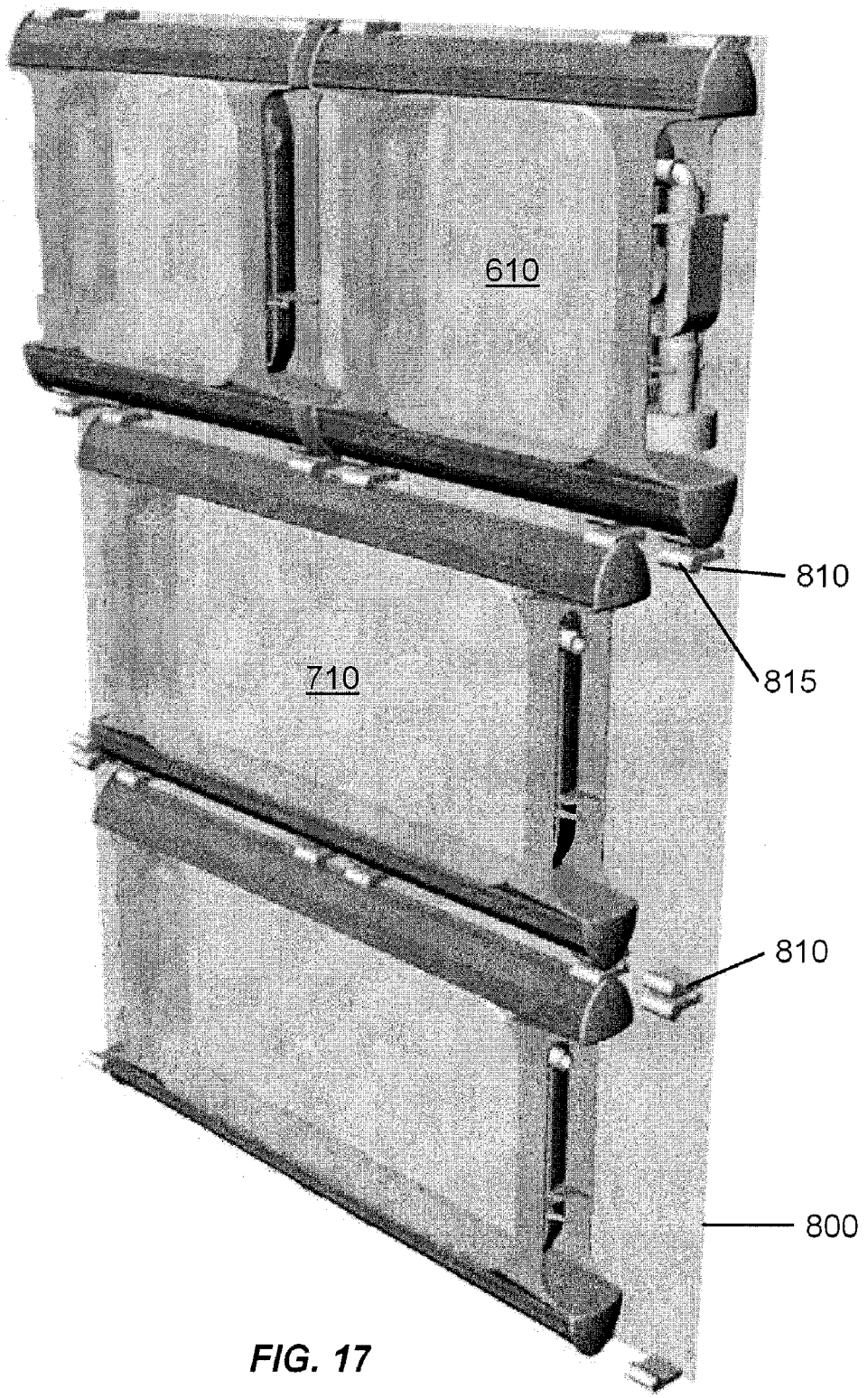

FIG. 17

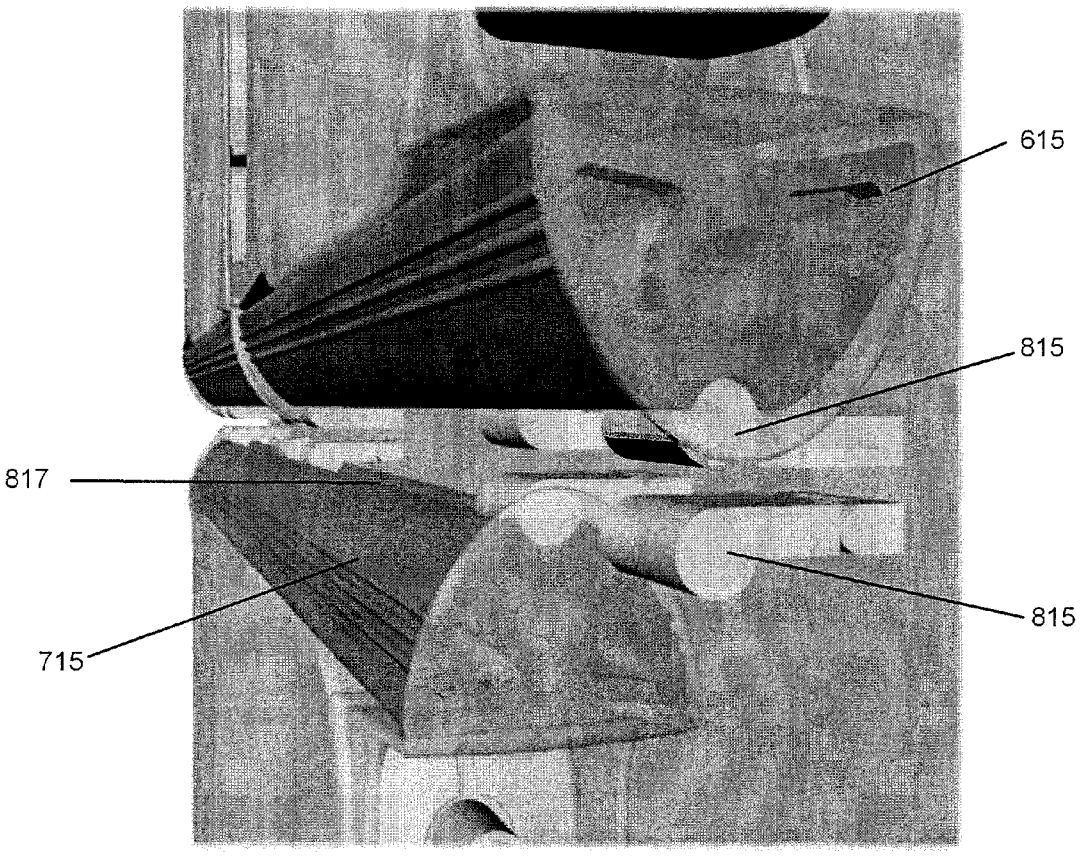

FIG. 18

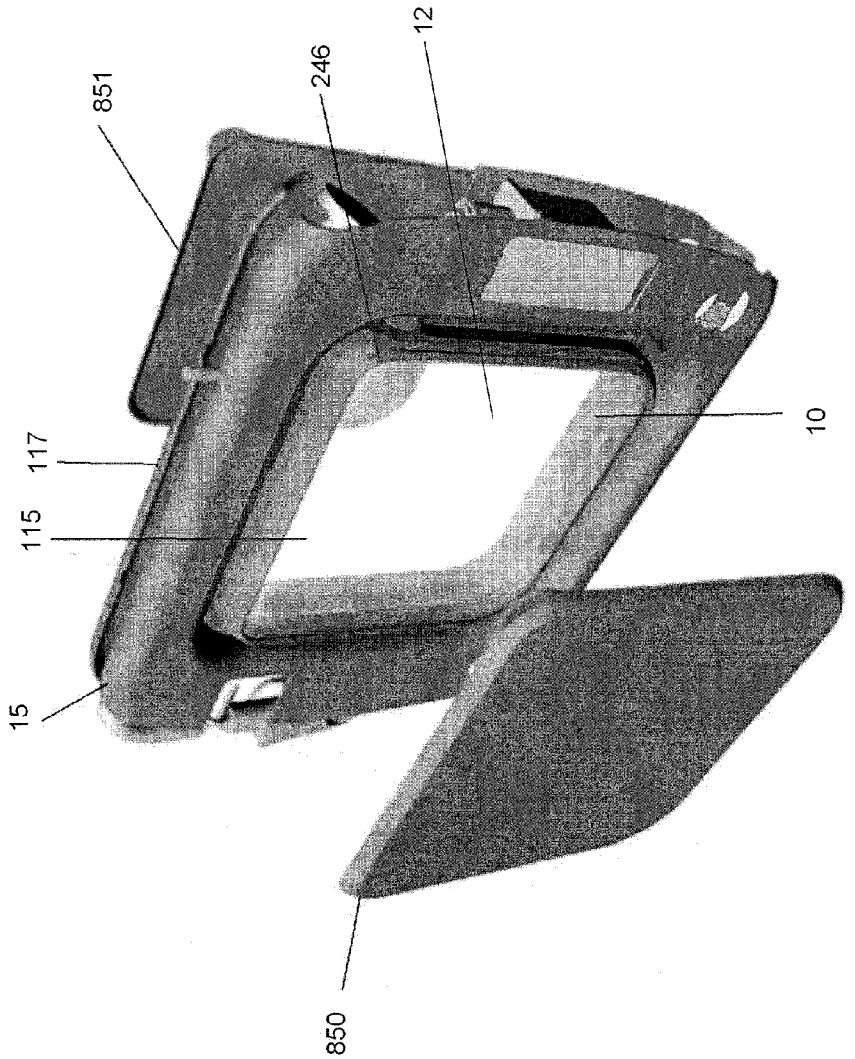

FIG. 19

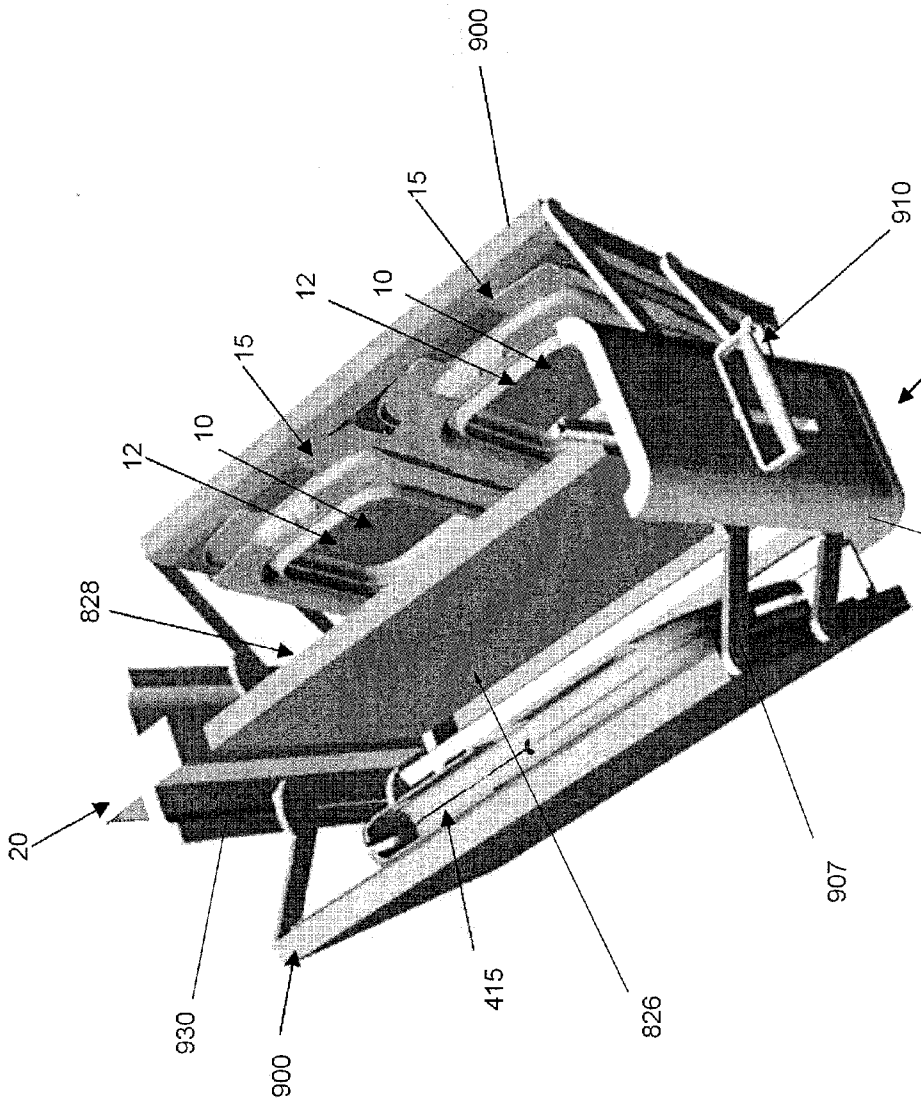

FIG. 20

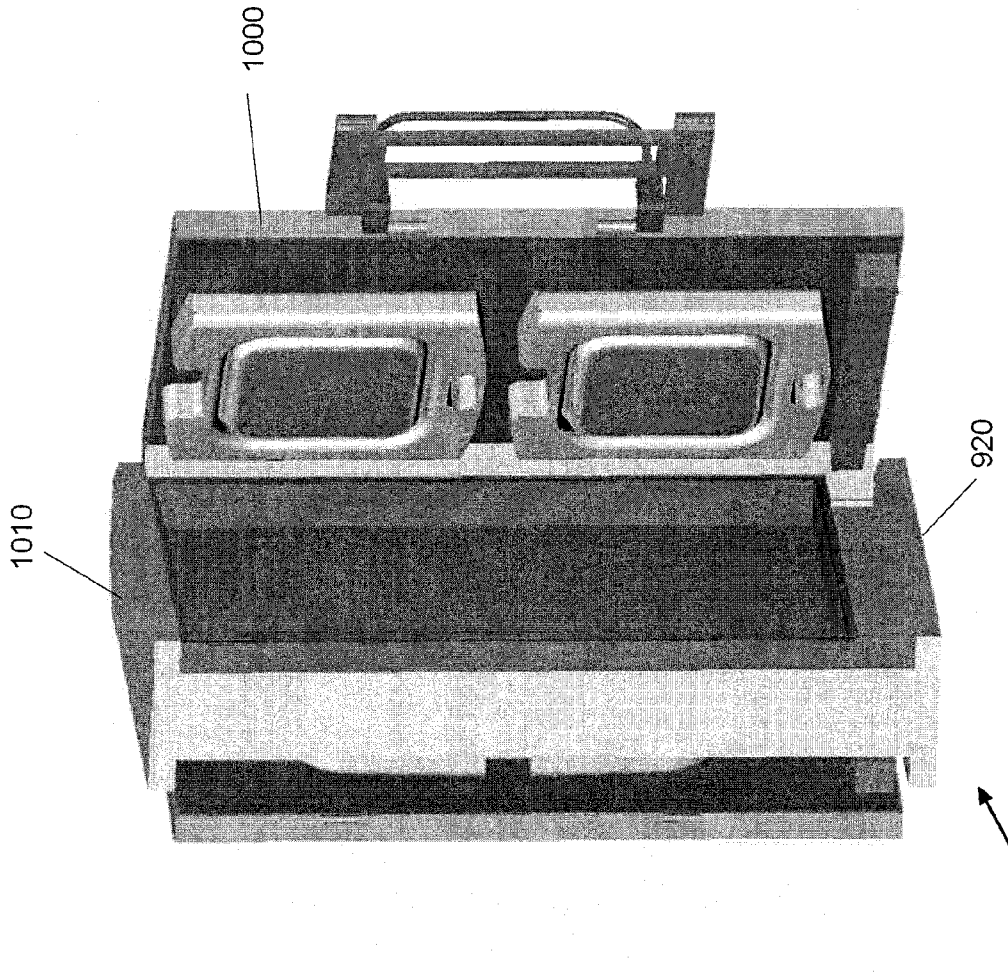

FIG. 21

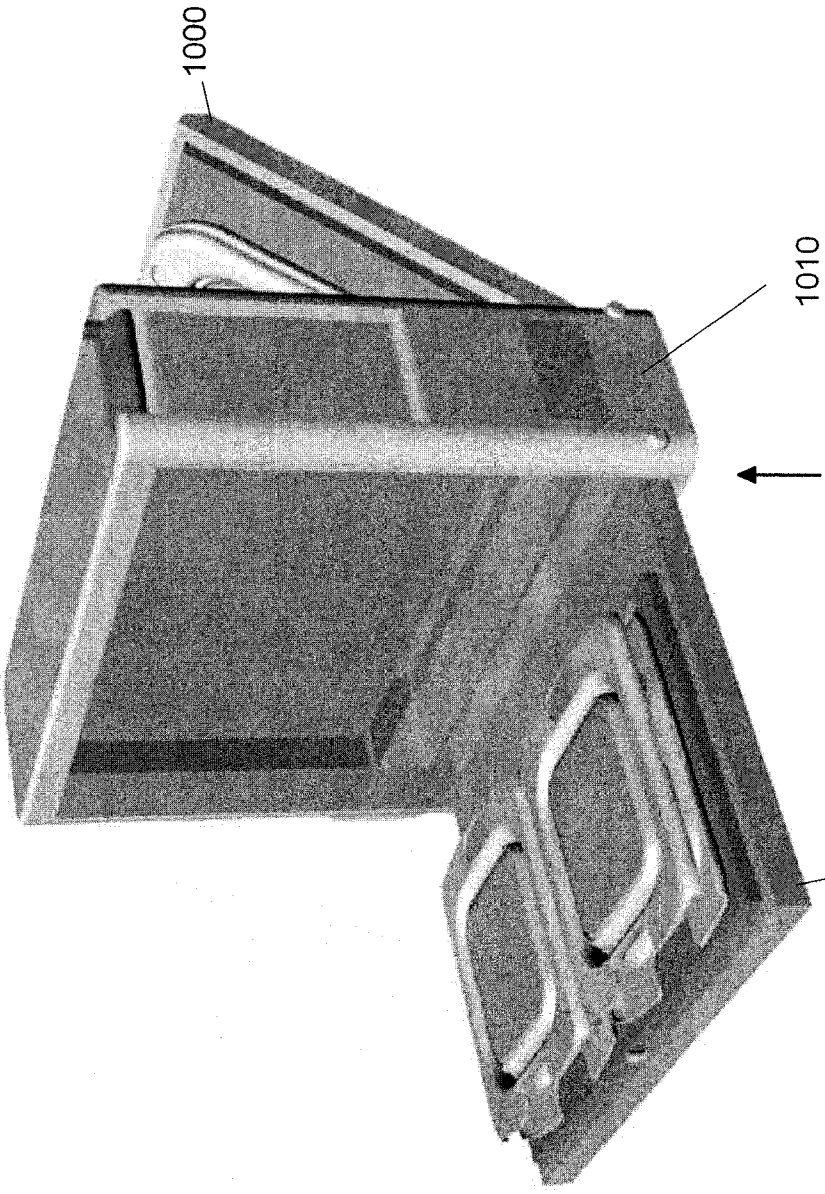

FIG. 22

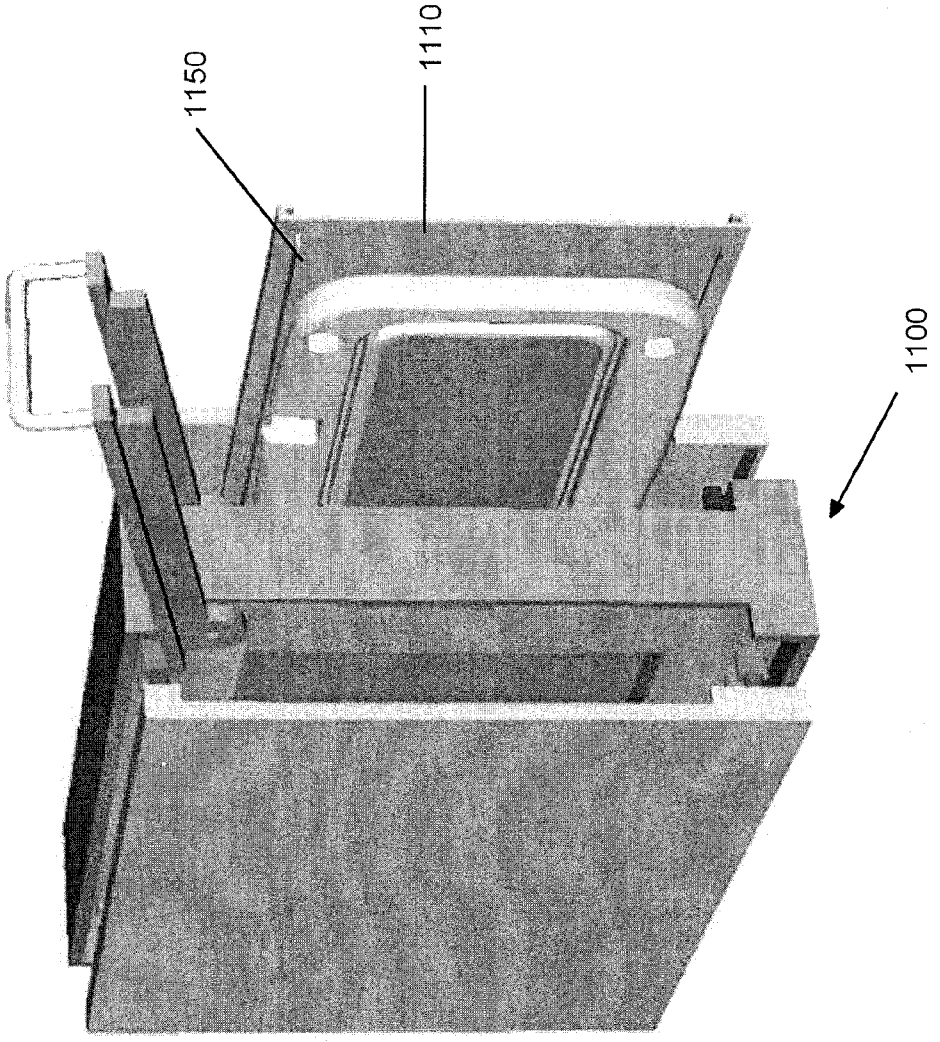

FIG. 23

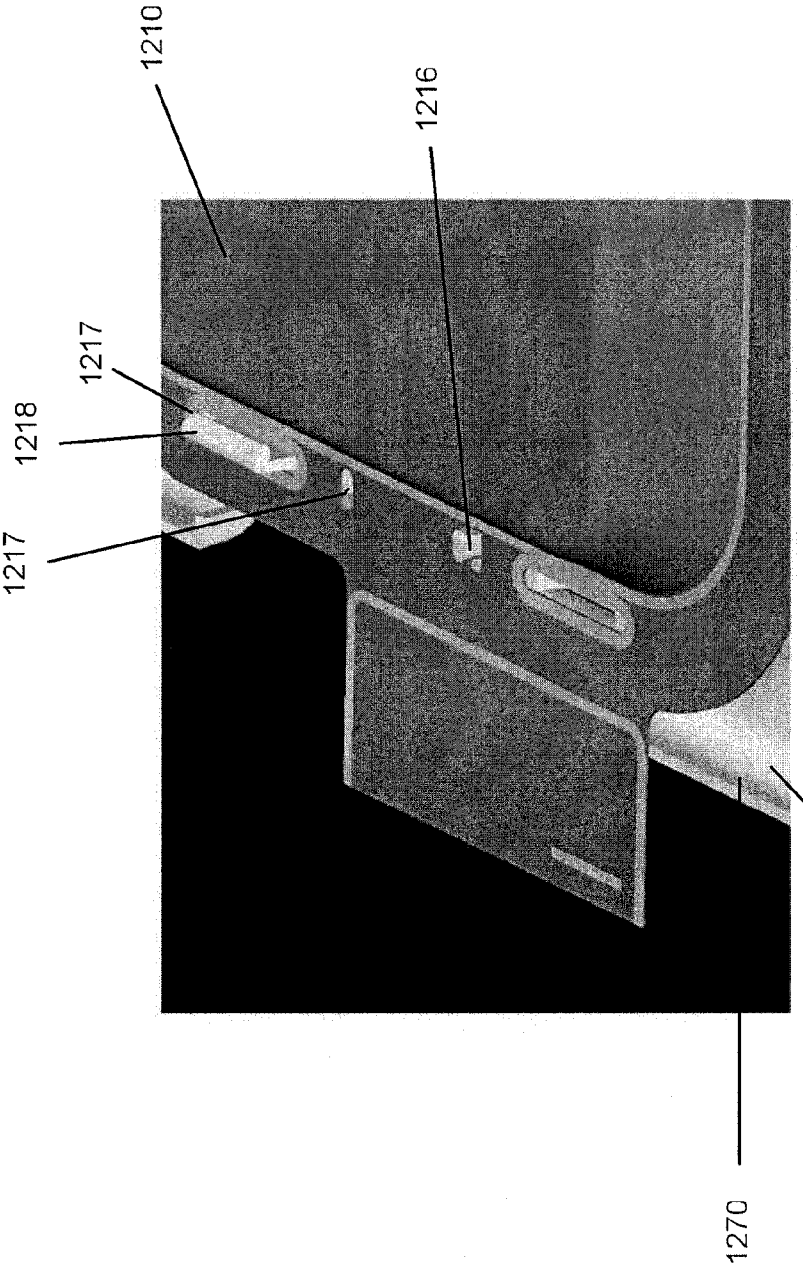

FIG. 24

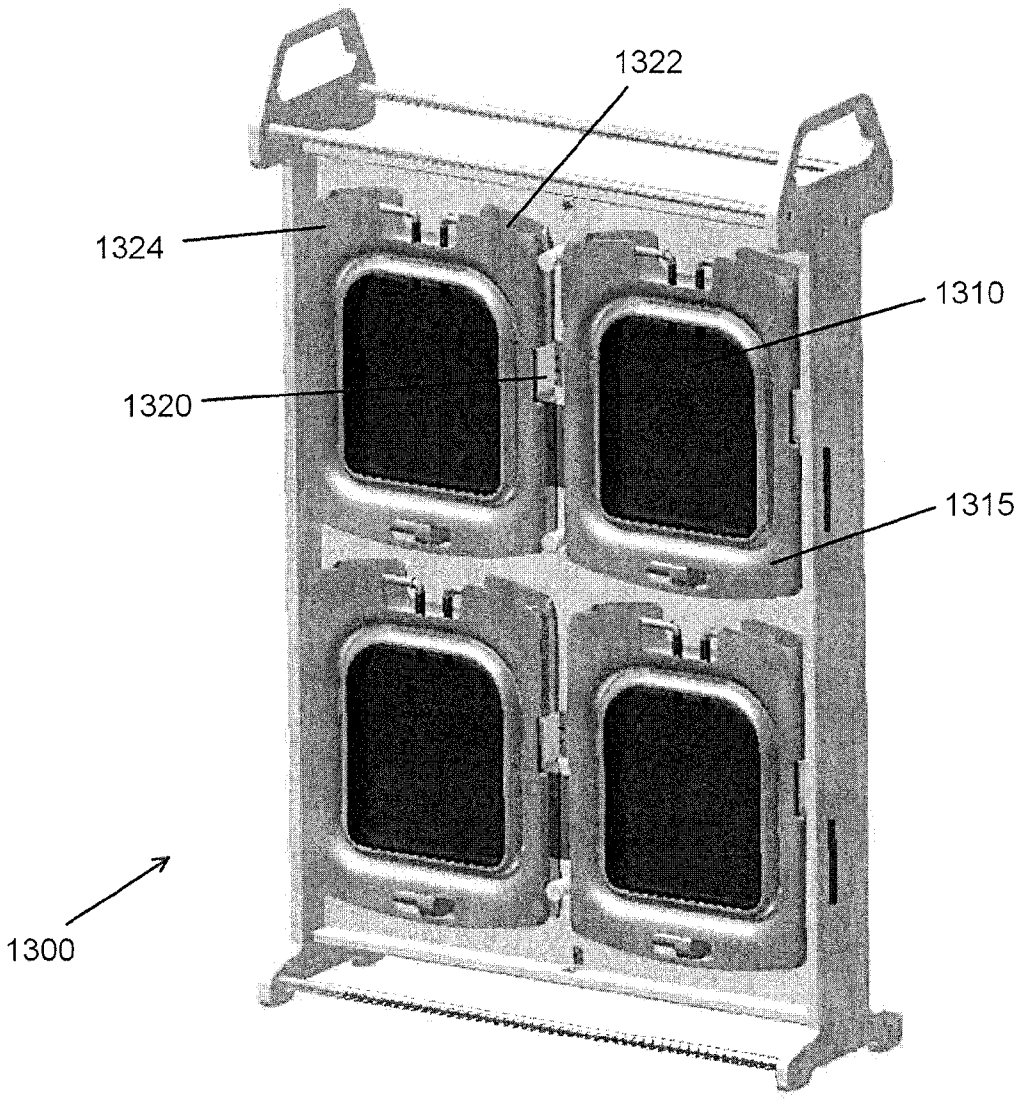

FIG. 25

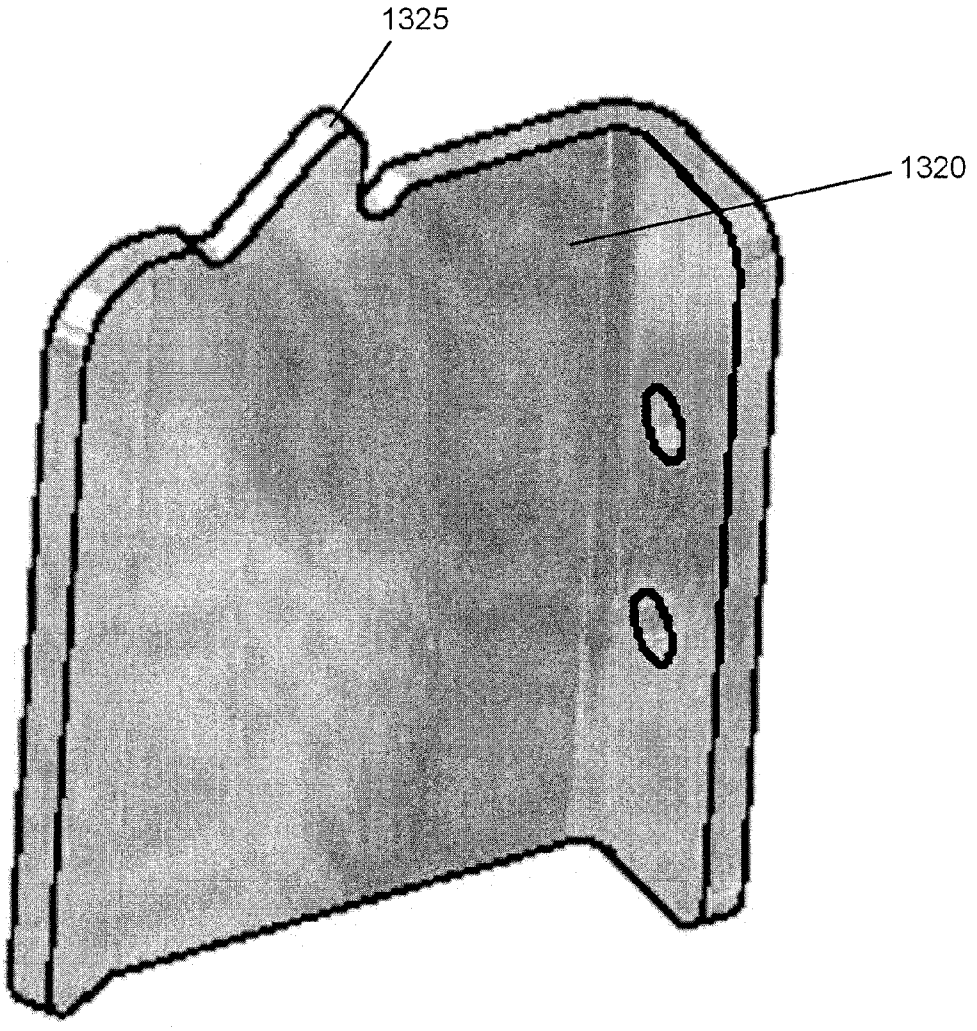

FIG. 26

SYSTEMS AND METHODS FOR FREEZING, STORING AND THAWING BIOPHARMACEUTICAL MATERIALS

CROSS-REFERENCE TO RELATED APPLICATIONS

[0001] This application claims the benefit of U.S. Provisional Patent Application No. 60/779,823, filed on Mar. 6, 2006, the entirety of which is incorporated herein by reference.

TECHNICAL FIELD

[0002] This invention relates, in general, to biopharmaceutical materials, preservation methods and systems, and more particularly to systems and methods for freezing, mixing, storing and thawing of biopharmaceutical materials.

BACKGROUND ART

[0003] Preservation of biopharmaceutical materials, such as cryopreservation, is important in the manufacture, use, transport, storage and sale of such materials. For example, biopharmaceutical materials are often preserved by freezing between processing steps and during storage. Similarly, biopharmaceutical materials are often frozen and thawed as part of the development process to enhance the quality or to simplify the development process.

[0004] When freezing biopharmaceutical materials, the overall quality, and in particular pharmaceutical activity, of the biopharmaceutical materials is desirably preserved, without substantial degradation of the biopharmaceutical materials.

[0005] Currently, preservation of biopharmaceutical material, particularly in bulk quantities, often involves placing a container containing liquid biopharmaceutical material in a cabinet freezer, chest freezer or walk-in freezer and allowing the biopharmaceutical material to freeze. Specifically, the container, which is typically one or more liters in volume and may range up to ten or more liters, is often placed on a shelf in the cabinet freezer, chest freezer or walk-in freezer and the biopharmaceutical material is allowed to freeze. These containers may be stainless-steel vessels, plastic bottles or carboys, or plastic bags. They are typically filled with a specified volume to allow for freezing and expansion and then transferred into the freezers at temperatures typically ranging from negative 20 degrees Celsius to negative 70 degrees Celsius or below.

[0006] To ensure efficient use of available space inside the freezer, containers are placed alongside one another and sometimes are stacked into an array with varied spatial regularity. Under these conditions, cooling of the biopharmaceutical solution occurs at different rates depending on the exposure of each container to the surrounding cold air, and the extent to which that container is shielded by neighboring containers. For example, containers placed close to the cooling source or those on the outside of an array of containers would be cooled more rapidly than those further away from the cooling source and/or situated at the interior of the array.

[0007] In general, adjacent placement of multiple containers in a freezer creates thermal gradients from container to container. The freezing rate and product quality then depend on the actual freezer load, space between the containers, container size, container shape, and air movement in the freezer. This results in a different thermal history for the contents of the containers depending on their location in a freezer, and their size, for example. Also, the use of different containers for individual portions of a single batch of biopharmaceutical material may cause different results for portions of the same batch due to different thermal histories resulting from freezing in a multiple container freezer, particularly if the storage arrangement, and/or the size and shape of the containers, is haphazard and random. Another consequence of obtaining a range of freezing times is that the contents of certain containers may freeze so slowly that the target solute can no longer be captured within the ice phase, but remains in a progressively smaller liquid phase. This phenomenon is referred to as cyroconcentration. In some cases such cyroconcentration could result in precipitation of the biopharmaceutical product, thus resulting in product loss.

[0008] Disposable bulk storage containers such as plastic bags or other flexible containers often are damaged, leading to loss of the biopharmaceutical material. Particularly, the volumetric expansion of the biopharmaceutical materials during freezing could generate excessive pressure in an over filled bag or in a pocket of occluded liquid adjoining the bag material, possibly leading to rupture or damage to the integrity of the bag. Moreover, handling of such disposable containers, such as plastic bags, during freezing, thawing, or transportation of these containers often result in damage thereof, due, for example, to shock, abrasion, impact, or other mishandling events arising from operator errors or inadequate protection of the bags in use.

[0009] Similarly, thawing of bulk biopharmaceutical materials typically involved removing them from a freezer and allowing them to thaw at room temperature. Such uncontrolled thawing can also lead to product loss. Generally, rapid thawing of biopharmaceutical materials results in less product loss than slower thawing. Further, it may also be desirable to control temperature of the biopharmaceutical materials during a thawing process since exposure of some biopharmaceutical materials to elevated temperatures may also lead to product loss. For example, it may be desirable to maintain a thawing biopharmaceutical material at about 0° C. when still in liquid and solid form during thawing thereof.

[0010] Further, it may be desirable to mix liquid bulk biopharmaceutical material at a homogeneous temperature above, below, or at an ambient temperature level. The mixing of biopharmaceutical materials in containers is important in the manufacture, use, transport, and storage of such materials. For example, biopharmaceutical materials are often blended, compounded, or formulated by mixing during processing steps and kept homogeneous during storage. Similarly, biopharmaceutical materials are often blended, compounded, or formulated by mixing as part of this development process to enhance the quality or to simplify the development process.

[0011] Currently, in some aspects, mixing of bulk biopharmaceutical materials involves transferring the product out of a container comprising the biopharmaceutical materials into a tank with a mechanical agitator, mixing and transferring the material back to the container. During those

operations the containment may be broken and the product sterility and purity compromised. The homogeneous product may separate again after transfer back to its original container. Multiple transfers may expose product to excessive shear and to gas-liquid interfaces, which may adversely affect the product. Thus, it is preferable if such mixing can be accomplished without transferring the biopharmaceutical material out of the container or inserting a mixer into the container, i.e., noninvasive mixing is preferred. When utilizing such noninvasive mixing, the overall quality, sterility, and in particular pharmaceutical activity, of the biopharmaceutical materials is desirably preserved, without substantial degradation of the biopharmaceutical materials.

[0012] Thus, there is a need for systems and methods for freezing, thawing, storing, and mixing biopharmaceutical materials, particularly in bulk quantities, that are controlled, do not result in loss of biopharmaceutical material, and are repeatable.

SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

[0013] The present invention provides, in a first aspect, a system for use in freezing, storing and thawing biopharmaceutical materials which includes a flexible sterile container means for holding biopharmaceutical material therein and a holder more rigid than said container means. The container means is received in a cavity of the holder and the holder extends along a perimeter of the container means. The holder is fixedly connected to the container means. The holder includes opposing sides defining an opening and the container means extends between the opposing sides of the holder defining the opening. The container means includes a substantially smooth exterior surface extending between the opposing sides.

[0014] The present invention provides, in a second aspect, a method for use in freezing, storing and thawing biopharmaceutical materials which includes providing a flexible sterile container means for holding biopharmaceutical material therein. The holder is more rigid than the container means and is fixedly connected to the container means. The container means is received in a cavity of the holder and the holder extends along a perimeter of the container means. The container means extends between opposing sides of the holder defining an opening. The container means includes a substantially smooth exterior surface extending between the opposing sides.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

[0015] The subject matter which is regarded as the invention is particularly pointed out and distinctly claimed in the claims at the conclusion of the specification. The foregoing and other features, and advantages of the invention will be readily understood from the following detailed description of preferred embodiments taken in conjunction with the accompanying drawings in which:

[0016] FIG. **1** is a front elevational view of a holder having a container therein in accordance with the present invention;

[0017] FIG. **2** is a side elevational view of the holder of FIG. **1**;

[0018] FIG. **3** is a top elevational view of the holder of FIG. **1**;

[0019] FIG. **4** is a cross-sectional view of the holder of FIG. **1** taken along lines **4-4** of FIG. **2**;

[0020] FIG. **5** is a perspective exploded view of the holder of FIG. **1**;

[0021] FIG. **6** is a perspective view of a supporting plate structure having the holder of FIG. **1** and a second holder attached thereto;

[0022] FIG. **7** is a perspective view of a temperature control unit;

[0023] FIG. **8** is a cross-sectional view of an interior portion of the temperature control unit of FIG. **7** with the supporting plate structure of FIG. **6** having the holders of FIG. **1** attached thereto;

[0024] FIG. **9** is a front elevational view of a second embodiment of a holder in accordance with the present invention;

[0025] FIG. **10** is a side elevational view of the holder of FIG. **9**;

[0026] FIG. **11** is a top elevational view of the holder of FIG. **9**;

[0027] FIG. **12** is a perspective exploded view of the holder of FIG. **9**;

[0028] FIG. **13** is a top perspective view of the holder of FIG. **9**;

[0029] FIG. **14** is a front elevational view of another embodiment of a holder in accordance with the present invention;

[0030] FIG. **15** is a side elevational view of the holder of FIG. **14**;

[0031] FIG. **16** is top elevational view of the holder of FIG. **14**;

[0032] FIG. **17** is a perspective view of a supporting plate structure having the holder of FIG. **9** and the holder of FIG. **14** attached thereto; and

[0033] FIG. **18** is a perspective view of the holder of FIG. **9** attached to the supporting plate structure of FIG. **17** showing a connecting mechanism of the supporting plate structure being received in a groove of the holder.

[0034] FIG. **19** is a top perspective view of the holder of FIG. **1** further including protective covers attachable to the holder.

[0035] FIG. **20** is a top perspective view of another embodiment of a temperature control unit with multiple holders according to FIG. **1** placed inside it.

[0036] FIG. **21** is a perspective view of a further embodiment of a temperature control unit having multiple holders as depicted in FIG. **1** placed inside it.

[0037] FIG. **22** is a perspective view of yet another embodiment of a temperature control unit having multiple holders as depicted in FIG. **1** received therein;

[0038] FIG. **23** is a perspective view of yet a further embodiment of a temperature control unit with multiple holders as depicted in FIG. **1** placed inside it.

[0039] FIG. **24** is a top elevational view of a container having a slot engaged with a post and a snap of a holder in accordance with the present invention;

[0040] FIG. **25** is an elevational view of a plurality of holders attached to a supporting plate via a plurality of hooks in accordance with the present invention; and

[0041] FIG. **26** is a perspective view of one of the hooks of the plate of FIG. **25**.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION

[0042] In accordance with the principles of the present invention, systems and methods for freezing, thawing and storing biopharmaceutical materials are provided.

[0043] In an exemplary embodiment depicted in FIGS. **1-8** portions of a system for cooling, freezing, preserving, processing, thawing, and mixing biopharmaceutical materials are shown. The system may include a sterile container, such as a flexible container **10**, configured to contain the biopharmaceutical materials and configured to be supported by a supporting structure, such as a frame or holder **15**. The holder may be more rigid than the container and may include a cavity for receiving the container. The holder extends along a perimeter of the container and be fixedly connected to the containers. The holder includes opposing sides defining an opening. The container may extend between the opposing sides of the holder defining the opening and the container has a substantially smooth exterior surface extending between the opposing sides. Flexible container **10** and holder **15** may also be adapted to be received in a temperature control unit **20** (FIGS. **7-8**).

[0044] Flexible container **10** (FIGS. **1-6** and **8**) may be formed of a laminated film which includes a plurality of layers and may have an interior volume ranging from 0.01-100 liters, for example. Further, flexible container **10** could be available in a variety of sizes to accommodate different uses, for example, 1 and 2 liter flexible containers may be utilized. Such one and two liter containers are advantageous, because they may be transported by hand by an individual due to their moderate weight and bulk when filled with biopharmaceutical material. Also a biocompatible product-contacting layer of the interior of flexible container **10** may be formed of a low density polyethylene, very low density polyethylene, ethylene vinyl acetate copolymer, polyester, polyamide, polyvinylchloride, polypropylene, polyfluoroethylene, polyvinylidenefluoride, polyurethane or fluoroethylenepropylene, for example. A gas and water vapor barrier layer may also be formed of an ethylene/vinyl alcohol copolymer mixture within a polyamide or an ethylene vinyl acetate copolymer. Further, flexible container **10** may include a layer with high mechanical strength (e.g. a polyamide), and an external layer with insulating effect to heat welding, for example, polyester. The layers may be compatible with warm and cold conditions and may be able to withstand ionizing irradiation for sterilization purposes. Also, flexible container **10** may have a large surface area to volume ratio, and a relatively thin wall thus promoting heat transfer therethrough when received in temperature control unit **20** (FIGS. **7-8**). One example of materials useful for formulation of flexible container **10** is described in U.S. Pat. No. 5,988,422 to Vallot, the entire subject matter of which is hereby incorporated herein by reference.

[0045] Container **10** may be adapted to receive and contain frozen and/or liquid biopharmaceutical materials. In an embodiment, the biopharmaceutical materials may comprise protein solutions, protein formulations, amino acid solutions, amino acid formulations, peptide solutions, peptide formulations, DNA solutions, DNA formulations, RNA solutions, RNA formulations, nucleic acid solutions, nucleic acid formulations, antibodies and their fragments, enzymes and their fragments, vaccines, viruses and their fragments, biological cell suspensions, biological cell fragment suspensions (including cell organelles, nuclei, inclusion bodies, membrane proteins, and/or membranes), tissue fragments suspensions, cell aggregates suspensions, biological tissues in solution, organs in solution, embryos in solution, cell growth media, serum, biologicals, blood products, preservation solutions, fermentation broths, and cell culture fluids with and without cells, mixtures of the above and biocatalysts and their fragments.

[0046] Sterile, flexible container **10** may be configured (e.g., shaped and dimensioned) to be received in, and integrally connected to, a supporting structure, such as frame or holder **15** (FIGS. **1-6**), for supporting flexible container **10**. For example, holder **15** may include a first portion **115** and a second portion **117** having a cavity **240** therebetween when fixedly connected to one another. Cavity **240** may be bounded by an inner surface **207**, a first opening **210** and a second opening **211** on an opposite side of holder **15** from opening **210** as depicted in FIGS. **1-5**. More specifically, container **10** may be received in cavity **240** and may be integrally (e.g., non-separably) connected to first portion **115** and/or second portion **117**. For example, container **10** may be heat sealed (e.g., at one or more heat seal locations **242**) or otherwise connected to first portion **115** and/or second portion **117** to prevent or inhibit separation of container **10** therefrom.

[0047] The openings (e.g., first opening **210** and second opening **211**) in holder **15** may extend between opposite sides of a restraining flange or rim **246** of holder **15**, which is configured to provide support to container **10** when it is filled with biopharmaceutical materials. More specifically, each opening may be surrounded by such a rim or other interior portion of a holder. Further, rim **246** may provide support in a direction such that it retains the container in the cavity (e.g., rim **246** may abut an exterior surface of container **10** and may inhibit movement of container **10** through opening **210** or opening **211** toward an exterior of holder **15**). Also, rim **246** is shaped to retain and protect an outer perimeter of container **10**, e.g., to inhibit or prevent sharp edges from contacting the container. Further, container **10** may extend substantially flat or smooth between opposite sides of rim **246**. Also, the openings expose a large surface area of container **10** to an exterior of holder **15**. For example, container **10** may be exposed to an interior **26** of a temperature control unit **20** (FIGS. **7-8**) or a blast freezer (not shown), when received therein. A holder could include only one opening adjacent the container. For example, such a holder could include an opening, such as opening **210**, while the opposite side (e.g., in place of opening **211**) of the holder may be a solid portion formed of the same material as the rest of the holder.

[0048] As depicted in FIG. **2**, first portion **115** and second portion **117** of holder **15** may be at least partially separated by a space **119** therebetween. Such space allows the defor-

mation of first portion **115** and/or second portion **117** toward one another (i.e., into space **119**) in response to an impact (such as the impact from a person dropping the holder **15** when the container **10** is filled with biopharmaceutical materials) or other stress placed thereon thereby avoiding such stress being applied to container **10**. Any damage to container **10** resulting from such impact or stress is therefore reduced or inhibited. Damage may also be reduced or inhibited due to the perimeter of container **10** being surrounded by holder **15** connected thereto, which may be formed of molded plastic, stainless steel, or another material configured to support a weight of container **10** and protect container **10** from being punctured or damaged due to an impact or stress on holder **15**. In addition, a container surface (e.g., a first side **12** of container **10**) exposed to the exterior through openings **210** and **211** may be protected by additional covers **850** and **851** (FIG. **19**) during the storage and or shipment of the holder **15**. Such semi-rigid covers **850** and **851** may be releasably connected (e.g., snapped) onto rim **246** of the holder **15** following the freezing and/or thawing of the biopharmaceutical material in temperature control unit **20** of FIG. **8**, or in a chest or walk in freezer. Also, the use of covers (e.g., covers **850** and **851**) may allow multiple holders (e.g., holders **15**) to be horizontally aligned and stacked on each other. For example, holder **15** having covers **850** and **851** attached thereto may be stacked with a second holder (e.g., holder **15**) such that one of covers **850** and **851** may abut a cover on a the second holder (e.g., holder **15**) located above or below holder **15** in a vertical stack of holders arranged horizontally. The covers may inhibit damage to containers held in the holders while providing structural support to the vertically stacked horizontally aligned holders.

[**0049**] As shown in FIGS. **2-5**, container **10** may include one or more ports or conduits **120** to allow filling or draining of biopharmaceutical materials or other solids, liquids, or gases into and/or out of the interior (not shown) of container **10**. Conduits **120** may also be used to insert a measurement probe (not shown) inside container **10** (e.g., a pH electrode, a conductivity sensor, temperature probe, an ion selective electrode, a spectophotometric probe, an ultrasound sensor, an optic fiber.) Conduits **120** may be received in a storage cavity **222** between first portion **115** and second portion **117** of holder **15**. Cavity **222** may be positioned in the top part and/or the bottom part of container **10**. The position of the conduits may facilitate filling and/or drainage of the containers. Storage cavity **222** may include an opening **224** to allow access to conduit **120**. Further openings (e.g., a front storage opening **212**) may also be located on the front side of protective case **15** to allow access to a label holder (not shown) attached to container **10** to facilitate the identification of the container.

[**0050**] Conduit **120** may be integral to container **10** or it may be connectable to a receiving port (not shown) thereof. For example, conduit **120** could be connected to a receiving port using a fitting placed within the inlet port. Fittings such as those described in U.S. Pat. No. 6,186,932, may be used for the connection of such conduits. Also, fittings which can maintain the sterility of the contents of the container or flexible container may preferably be used. The fittings may be configured in different shapes, such as straight fittings and/or angled fittings including ninety (90) degree elbows, if desired. In another example, conduit **120** may include a filter (not shown) to filter any impurities or other undesirable materials from the biopharmaceutical material. Storage cavity **222** may protect conduit **120** and the fittings from any damage resulting from impact or stress such as the impact resulting from a person dropping holder **15** when container **10** is filled with biopharmaceutical materials.

[**0051**] Holder **15** may preferably be formed of materials which remain stable and retain their structural properties over a large range of temperatures. Specifically, such materials should retain their load-bearing capacity and exhibit cold crack temperatures no higher than negative 80 degrees Celsius while being resistant to cleaning agents and methods commonly used in biopharmaceutical manufacturing, e.g., sodium hydroxide, sodium hypochloride (e.g., CLOROX), peracetic acid, etc. For example, holder **15** could be formed of injection molded plastic or thermo formed plastic. Also, holder **15** may be formed of fluoropolymer resin (e.g. TEFLON), stainless steel or any number of other materials including aluminum, polyethylene, polypropylene, polycarbonate, and polysulfone, for example. Further materials may include composite materials such as glass-reinforced plastic, carbon-fiber reinforced resins, or other engineering plastic materials known to offer high strength-to-weight rations and which are serviceable at various temperatures of interest. It will be understood by those skilled in the art that first portion **115** and second portion **117** may be monolithic and integrally formed as one piece or fixedly connected together. Further, holder **15** could be formed of a single material (e.g., injection molded plastic) or it could be formed of different materials and connected together. Also, such holders (e.g., holder **15**) integrally connected to flexible containers (e.g., containers **10** and **410**) may be disposable, thus promoting ease of use.

[**0052**] Also, a holder (e.g., holder **15**) may be formed, sized and/or dimensioned to receive and support containers of various sizes to provide additional rigidity and support to the container(s), thus facilitating handling, storage, and/or temperature control thereof. For example, as depicted in FIG. **6**, a second holder **415** may have a second container **410** received therein having a volume about twice that of container **10** held in holder **15**. Holder **15** and holder **415** may be connected to a first side **501** of supporting plate **500**. For example, holder **15** may include openings **250** configured to receive posts **510** of plate **500**. Holder **15** may thereby be attached to plate **500** by receiving one or more posts **510** in one or more openings **250**. Similarly, holder **415** may thereby be attached to plate **500** below holder **15** by receiving one or more posts **510** in one or more openings **450**. Plate **500** may be received in a temperature control unit, such as temperature control unit **20** (FIGS. **7-8**) or a blast freezer (not shown). Further, plate **500** could include posts or other connecting members on an exterior surface (not shown) on an opposite side **502** (FIG. **8**) relative to first surface **501** such that containers may be attached to both sides of plate **500**.

[**0053**] In another example depicted in FIG. **24**, a container **1210** may be identical to container **10** except for the means of connection to a holder **1215**. More particularly, container **1210** may have slots **1217** to receive snaps **1217** or posts **1216** of holder **1215**. The posts or snaps may extend through the slots to connect a bottom portion **1270** of holder **1215** to a top portion (not shown) thereof. The connection between the bottom portion and top portion may be permanent or releasable.

[0054] Temperature control unit **20** is configured to control the temperature of cavity or interior **26** thereof, which may include one or more slots **25** as depicted in FIGS. **7** and **8**. Also, temperature control unit **20** may include therein, or may be coupled to, a controller portion **21** and/or a sensor (e.g. a temperature sensor **18**) to allow a user to control the heating, cooling, freezing, agitating, thawing, or mixing, for example, of the biopharmaceutical materials in flexible container **10**, when containers **10** and **410** on supporting plate **500** are inserted into cavity **26** of temperature control unit **20**. Heating, cooling, freezing or thawing of the contents of containers (e.g., container **10**, container **410**) placed inside temperature control unit **20** may be controlled by blowing a continuous stream of cold or warm air, by direct contact of the containers with cold or warm surfaces, or by spraying cooling fluid thereon (e.g., liquid nitrogen), for example.

[0055] In one embodiment, temperature control unit **20** includes a heat exchanger having one or more heat transfer or conduction plates for heating and/or cooling one or more containers and biopharmaceutical materials contained therein, as best depicted in FIGS. **7-8**. For example, temperature control unit **20** may include heat transfer plates **28** for contacting the containers (e.g., container **10** and/or **410**) to cool or heat the contents thereof. For example, first side **12** of container **10** may contact a heat transfer surface (e.g., one of plates **28**) of interior **26** of temperature control unit **20** through opening **210** or opening **211** to control the temperature of the biopharmaceutical material in container **10**. Alternatively, side **12** of flexible container **10** may be exposed to a still or circulating air within temperature control unit **20**, a blast freezer or other means of controlling a temperature of an outer surface of a container (e.g., container **10**) or immediate ambient surroundings thereof.

[0056] One or more of plates **28** could have heat transfer fluids circulating therethrough, such as water, oil, glycol, silicone fluid, hot air, cold air, alcohol, freons, freezing salty brines, liquid nitrogen or other heat transfer fluids as is known by those skilled in the art. Plates **28** could further include heat transfer enhancing structures such as fins and pins due to required high heat flux for product thawing, as will be understood by those skilled in the art.

[0057] One or more plates **28** may also include temperature sensor **18** mounted on an interior portion or exterior portion of plates **28** or it may be integral thereto. Temperature sensor **18** may detect a temperature of one or more of plates **28** and one or more locations thereon. Controller portion **21** of temperature control unit **20** may be coupled to temperature sensor **18** and to a heat transfer fluid control portion **22** of temperature control unit **20**. Such heat transfer fluids may be circulated through plates **28** by heat transfer fluid control portion **22** controlled by controller portion **21** in response to temperatures detected by temperature sensor **18**.

[0058] In another example, a temperature sensor (not shown) could be located in a heat transfer fluid input (not shown) of a plate and/or a heat transfer output (not shown) of such a plate. A difference between the temperatures determined at such points could be utilized to determine the temperature of the biopharmaceutical materials held in a container (e.g., containers **10** and **410**). Thus, controller **21** may regulate a flow of heat transfer fluid to one or more of plates **28** to regulate a temperature of the biopharmaceutical materials held in such a container in slot **25** of cavity **26** of temperature control unit **20**. More specifically, controller **21** may cause a heat transfer fluid control portion **22** to circulate heat transfer fluids in plate(s) **28** to raise or lower a temperature of plate(s) **28**, thereby lowering or raising the temperature of a container (e.g., containers **10** and **410**) which is in contact with plate **28**. In this manner, the biopharmaceutical material may have its temperature controlled (i.e., it may be thawed or frozen). Alternatively, such control of heat transfer plates **28** may be performed by controller portion **21** controlling flow of heat transfer fluid to plates **28** in a predetermined manner without feedback from a sensor coupled to plates **28** or the heat transfer fluid. In a further example, a temperature sensor (not shown) could extend through a port or conduit of a container (e.g., container **10**) to allow a determination of a temperature of biopharmaceutical materials held therein. A flow of heat transfer fluid or other temperature regulation may be based on such determination.

[0059] Also, one or more of plates **28** may be moveable to contact container **10**, container **410** and/or any other container when the containers are received in holders (e.g., holders **15** and **415**) and the holders are connected to plate **500** and received in slot **25** of cavity **26** of temperature control unit **20**, as depicted in FIG. **8**. Further, plates **28** could be stationary and temperature control unit **20** may include one or more non-temperature controlled moveable plates, surfaces, or walls (not shown) configured to contact the container(s), when the container(s) and holder(s) are received in slot **25**. Alternatively, plates **28** may be movable along with such additional movable plates, surfaces, or walls. For example, temperature control units useful with the containers (e.g., containers **10**, **410**, **610** and **710**) and plates (e.g., plates **500** and **800**) of the present application are disclosed in co-owned U.S. Pat. No. 6,945,056, entitled "Systems and Methods for Freezing, Mixing and Thawing Biopharmaceutical Material", granted on Sep. 20, 2005.

[0060] In another embodiment, a temperature control unit includes a heat exchanger having one or more stationary heat transfer surfaces, in which a heat transfer fluid is circulating, for heating, cooling, freezing and or thawing one or more containers and biopharmaceutical materials contained therein. For example, a temperature control unit **820** may include a stationary heat transfer plate **828** for contacting multiple containers (e.g. container **10** and/or **410**) on one or on each face of heat transfer plate **828** as depicted in FIG. **20**.

[0061] For example container **10** may be attached to a moveable door **900** of temperature control unit **820**. Door **900** may be non-temperature controlled and/or insulated. Also, door **900** may be connected to a central body portion **905** of temperature control unit **820** by connecting rods or arms **907** which are pivotally connected to door **900** and central portion **905** to allow the moveable connection of door **900** between open (e.g., non-contacting position of the container relative to a heat exchange plate **828**) and closed (e.g., contacting) positions. The movable door is configured to move to contact the container(s) with one face of heat exchange plate **828** during cooling and/or heating operations. For example, first side **12** of container **10** may contact a heat transfer surface (e.g., heat exchange plate **828**) of an interior **826** of temperature control unit **820** through opening

210 to control the temperature of the biopharmaceutical material in container **10**. The second (i.e., opposite) side of container **10** may contact the insulated moveable door **900** of the temperature control unit **20** via opening **211**.

[**0062**] A latching mechanism **910** maintains the movable doors (e.g., doors **900**) closed onto a sealing gasket **930** (FIG. **20**) during the cooling and/or heating operations and insures a good thermal contact between heat exchange surface **28** and container first side **12**, along with promoting a good insulation of interior **826** of the temperature control unit **820**. A freezing path length defined by a distance between heat exchange plate **828** and movable door **900** when the doors are latched is substantially constant in any point of temperature control unit **820**, which contributes to the uniformity of the thermal treatment of the biopharmaceutical material placed inside container **10**.

[**0063**] Temperature sensors (not shown) may be mounted at an interface between moveable wall **900** and first side **12** of container **10** through opening **210**. The temperature detected at this interface corresponds to the last point to freeze and last point to thaw location of the biopharmaceutical product stored in container **10**. One or more of the temperature sensors may detect a temperature of one or more of containers **10** and one or more locations thereon. A controller portion (not shown) of temperature control unit **820** may be coupled to the temperature sensor(s) and to a heat transfer fluid control portion **822** (not shown) of temperature control unit **820**. Such heat transfer fluids may be circulated through plate **826** by the heat transfer fluid control portion controlled by the controller portion in response to temperature(s) detected by the temperature sensor(s).

[**0064**] Also, a holder (e.g., holder **15** or **415**) may include openings (not shown) configured to receive posts (not shown) of door **900**. Holder **15** may thereby be attached to door **900** by receiving one or more posts in one or more openings. Similarly, holder **415** may thereby be attached to door **900** by receiving one or more posts in one or more openings. Although doors **900** are depicted as being connected to central body portion **905** each by four arms **907**, the doors could be connected to the central body portion by more or less arms located at various locations along the doors and central body portion. For example, in addition to the exterior placement of the arms on the doors and interior connection thereof to the central body portion depicted, the arms could be connected to both exterior portions of the doors and a central body portion or both to interior portions thereof or a combination of these methods. The selective placement of the arms relative to the doors and the central body portion could allow the pivoting of the doors in various ways away from and back toward the central body portion. Further, the doors could be connected or latched to the central body portion in any number of ways having handles located on an exterior of the temperature control unit or hidden in some way. Moreover, the temperature control unit may be placed on a drip tray to catch any liquids such as biopharmaceutical materials, water, or other liquid coolants which may be produced by the freezing of biopharmaceutical materials, thawing of biopharmaceutical materials, condensation or other incidental leaks.

[**0065**] FIGS. **21-22** depict a temperature control unit **1020** which is a variation of temperature control unit **820** differing in that doors **1000** are connected to a central portion **1010** at a bottom portion of door **1000** and central portion **1010** via a pin or hinge (not shown) instead of arms **907**. In another example, holder **15** and/or holder **415** may be connected to an exterior surface of a plate **1100**, that may be received inside a temperature control unit **1110**, as depicted in FIG. **23**. Plate **1110** may include posts or other connecting members such as rails **1150** configured (e.g., shaped and dimensioned) to engage a receiving slot (not shown) on an outer surface of holder **15**.

[**0066**] Also, one or more moveable walls or doors (e.g., doors **900**, **1000**) may allow compression of a flexible container (e.g., flexible container **10**), and hence good thermal contact and substantially constant container depth, when the container is received in a holder (e.g., holder **15**) and the holder is received in an interior (e.g., interior **826**) of a temperature control unit (e.g., temperature control units **820**, **920**, **1020**, **1100**). To compensate for the increased pressure and expansion resulting from the freezing of the biopharmaceutical aqueous solution stored inside the container, a moveable wall or door (e.g., doors **900**, **1000**) might be spring loaded to allow an increase of distance between a heat exchange plate (e.g., plate **828**) and such a movable door (e.g., door **900**).

[**0067**] Also, a temperature control unit (e.g., temperature control unit **20**, **820**, **920**, **1100**) may be mounted onto a reciprocating or orbital mixer (not shown), thereby allowing the agitation of, and thereby promote thawing and mixing of, biopharmaceutical materials held in a container (e.g., container **10**) held therein. Such mixing could be performed for the purpose of thawing and mixing of the biopharmaceutical materials. More particularly, thawing rates of biopharmaceutical materials may be accelerated by generation of movement of partially-thawed solid-liquid mixture comprising a biopharmaceutical solution against walls of a container which may contact heat transfer surfaces, such as plates **28**.

[**0068**] In another embodiment depicted in FIGS. **9-13**, a third holder **615** may be integrally connected to a third container **610**. As depicted in FIG. **12**, holder **615** may include two vertical uprights **620** having grooves **625** configured to receive flanges **630** of container **610**. Holder **15** includes a upper cap **640** and lower cap **650**, which may be identical or mirror images of one another, connected to uprights **620**. Upper cap **640** and lower cap **650** may include cavities (e.g., cavity **655**) to receive conduits and fittings, such as conduits **660**, to allow filling, and/or draining, of container **610**. Such cavities may also include connecting structures (e.g., flange **657**) or other means for supporting the conduits. For example, flange **657** may be a semi-circular structure which receives one of conduits **660** to releasably connect conduits **660** thereto.

[**0069**] As depicted in FIGS. **14-16**, a fourth holder **715** may be integrally connected to a fourth container **710**. Holder **715** may be constructed in the same manner (e.g., formed of a same material and having a substantially same cross-sectional area) as holder **615** except that uprights **720** may be taller than uprights **620** and container **710** may be taller than container **610**. End caps **740** and **750** may be identical to caps **640** and **650**. As depicted in FIG. **17**, holder **615** and holder **715** may be releasably connected to a supporting plate **800**. Clips **810** may be located on supporting plate **800** such that they are deformable above, below, and/or to a side of the container when it is attached to plate

800. Clips **810** may have a lip **815** on a front end thereof to attach to, and to retain, a holder (e.g., holder **615** and holder **715**) on plate **800**. Further, as depicted in FIGS. **17-18**, such a holder (e.g., holder **615** and holder **715**) may include a slot **817** for receiving lip **815** or another projecting portion of plate **800**. As described above for holder **415** and holder **15** connected to plate **500**, plate **800** may be received in a temperature control unit (e.g., temperature to unit **20**) when holder **615** and/or holder **715** are connected thereto to facilitate cooling and/or heating of biopharmaceutical materials held in container **610** and/or container **710**, for example.

[**0070**] In another example depicted in FIGS. **25-26**, a plate **1300** may receive a plurality of holders **1315** holding containers **1310** similar to supporting plate **800** and supporting plate **500**. Supporting plate **1300** may include a plurality of supporting hooks **1320** for holding holders **1315** and containers **1310** thereon. Hooks **1320** may include a prong **1325** which may retain holders **1315** holding containers **1310** on plate **1300**. More specifically, prong **1325** may extend vertically upward into a cavity between a first portion **1322** adjacent the plate and a second portion **1324** fixedly or releasably connected thereto. The engagement of prongs **1325** in the cavity between the first and second portions may inhibit release of the holder from the hook in a direction normal to an outer surface of plate **1300**.

[**0071**] Also, it will be understood by one skilled in the art that various holders (e.g., holder **15** and holder **615**) may be integral to various sized containers (e.g., container **10** and container **610**) and may be received in a temperature control unit (e.g., temperature control unit **20**). Further, it will be understood to one skilled in the art that a supporting plate (e.g., plate **500**) may be attached to holders (e.g., holder **15**) in any number of ways which allow the holders to be selectively released therefrom. For example, the plates may include any number of pegs, connectors, clips, openings, or other means for attaching to connecting structures of one or more holders, such as peg openings, clips, fasteners, etc. Also, a supporting plate (e.g., supporting plate **500**) may include structures (not shown) allowing the heat transfer plate to stand upright (e.g., maintain a vertical orientation) when attached to such holders having biopharmaceutical materials held in containers thereof. Further, the supporting plate could be any structure configured (e.g., shaped, dimensioned and formed of sufficient strength) to support the holder(s) and to be received in a temperature control unit.

[**0072**] Although the containers are described herein as flexible containers, the containers may be made of a semi-rigid material such as polyethylene or the like. An example of such a container could include a container similar to a standard plastic milk jug. Containers made of such similar semi-rigid materials may benefit from additional rigidity supplied by attachment (e.g., fixedly) to a holder, for example. Further, the containers whether formed of a rigid, flexible or semi-rigid material, contain outer surfaces which may contact the interior surfaces (e.g., heat transfer plates) of a temperature control unit (e.g., temperature control unit **20**) so that there is direct contact between the cooled (e.g., to a subzero temperature) or heated interior surfaces of the temperature control unit and the outer surfaces of the container containing biopharmaceutical materials. Alternatively, the outer surfaces of the containers for holding the biopharmaceutical materials may be in contact with air flow in an interior (e.g., interior **25**) of the temperature control unit or other means of temperature control (e.g., a blast freezer) to cause the cooling and/or heating of the containers having the biopharmaceutical materials therein to cause the temperature of the biopharmaceutical materials to be controlled.

[**0073**] The biopharmaceutical material in the containers described above may thus be cooled or otherwise thermoregulated (e.g., to a subzero temperature) in temperature control unit **20** or a blast freezer, for example. When such operation is completed, the containers may be removed from temperature control unit **20** by removing the containers and the holders, or other support structures which the containers are received in or connected to, for example. The holders or other support structures holding the containers may be stored in a large chiller or freezer with an interior air temperature of about negative 20 degrees Celsius, for example.

[**0074**] A typical process for processing and/or preserving a biopharmaceutical material is described as follows. One or more containers (e.g., containers **10**, **410**, **610**, or **710**) is integrally formed or fixedly (e.g., non-separably) connected to a holder (e.g., holders **15**, **415**, **615** or **715**) as depicted in FIG. **5**. Also, holder **15** may be aligned substantially horizontally (e.g., such that outer surfaces of first portion **115** and second portion **117** are horizontal) and biopharmaceutical material, for example liquid biopharmaceutical material, may be inserted through conduit **120** into container **10**. Also, after biopharmaceutical material is received in the interior of the holder (e.g., holder **15**, **415**, **615** or **715**) through a conduit (e.g., conduit **120**), the conduit, or a portion thereof, may be removed from the holder by heat sealing the conduit of the container (e.g., container **10**, **410**, **610** or **710**) and then cutting and removing the portion of the conduit upstream of the seal. Such sealing may inhibit or prevent the biopharmaceutical materials held in the container from being contaminated. Holder **15** may be attached to supporting plate **500** and located in temperature control unit **20**, as shown in FIGS. **6-8**. Plates **28** in slot **25** may contact container **10** having biopharmaceutical material therein. The biopharmaceutical contents are frozen in temperature control unit **20** in a controlled manner (e.g., to negative 20 degrees Celsius or below), for example, such that the freeze rate (including the dendritic freeze front velocity from the sides of the container to the center) is controlled within upper and lower limits, as described in co-owned U.S. Pat. No. 6,453,683, issued Sep. 24, 2002. Thus, cryoconcentration of the biopharmaceutical material is prevented or inhibited, thereby preventing undesirable degradation of the biopharmaceutical material. After the biopharmaceutical material in the container(s) is frozen, holder **15** and the container(s) may be removed with or without plate **500** from temperature control unit **20** and placed in a large freezer, for example, a walk-in freezer having an interior air temperature of about negative 20 degrees Celsius for storage, as is typically present in large medical institutions (e.g., hospitals). Also, the use of containers (e.g., container **10** and container **410**) having a uniform thickness allow uniform cooling to occur within such a temperature control unit, blast freezer, or other means for controlling a temperature of the immediate surroundings of such containers.

[0075] Further, the above-described containers may be removed from a freezer or other system for storage of the flexible containers and contents thereof at a controlled temperature. These containers having biopharmaceutical material therein may then be received in a temperature control unit for heating, melting, agitating, mixing and/or thawing the biopharmaceutical material contained in the containers. For example, holder **15** supporting container **10** having frozen biopharmaceutical material therein may be placed in temperature control unit **20** where its temperature may be controlled (e.g. thawed) by heat transfer plate(s) **28**. In addition, holder **15** or supporting plate **500** on which holders **15** are secured may be submitted to gentle mixing inside temperature control unit **20** to accelerate the thawing kinetics and to minimize any solute concentration gradient in the thawed liquid. Also, when use of the biopharmaceutical materials held in the container (e.g., containers **10**, **410**, **610** or **710**) is desired, and if the conduit is previously at least partially removed and sealed, the remaining portion of the conduit or other portion of the container may be pierced or otherwise opened to allow fluid communication between an interior or an exterior thereof such that biopharmaceutical materials may be removed.

[0076] From the above description, it will be understood to one skilled in the art that the containers described herein may be adapted for use in holders, storage units, support structures, transportation devices, temperature control units, heat exchangers, vessels, and/or processors of various shapes or sizes. Further, the holders, containers, support structures, heat exchangers, temperature control units, and/or processors may be adapted to receive containers of various shapes or sizes. These holders or support structures may be configured for long or short term storage of the containers containing biopharmaceutical materials in liquid or frozen state, or may be adapted to transport the flexible containers containing biopharmaceutical materials in liquid or frozen state. For example, the temperature control unit may be insulated to allow the material to remain at a given temperature for a prolonged period of time. Furthermore, these holders, containers, support structures, temperature control units, heat exchangers, and/or processors may be adapted for utilization with materials other than biopharmaceutical materials. Finally, the storage containers, support structures, temperature control units, or holders may be equipped with various transport mechanisms, such as wheels, glides, sliders, dry-ice storage compartments or other devices to facilitate transport and organization thereof.

[0077] While the invention has been depicted and described in detail herein, it will be apparent to those skilled in the relevant art that various modifications, additions, substitutions and the like can be made without departing from the spirit of the invention and these are therefore considered to be within the scope of the invention as defined in the following claims.

1. A system for use in freezing, storing and thawing biopharmaceutical materials, said system comprising:

a flexible sterile container means for holding biopharmaceutical material therein;

a holder more rigid than said container means and having a cavity, said container means received in said cavity, said holder extending along a perimeter of said container means and fixedly connected to said container means;

said holder comprising opposing sides defining an opening, said container means extending between said opposing sides of said holder defining said opening and said container means comprising a substantially smooth exterior surface extending between said opposing sides.

2. The system of claim 1 wherein said holder surrounds said container and said opening exposes said container means to an exterior of said holder.

3. The system of claim 1 wherein said holder further comprises a rim extending from said opposing sides around said opening to support said container when said container is filled with the biopharmaceutical material.

4. The system of claim 1 further comprising a supporting plate connectable to said holder.

5. The system of claim 4 further comprising a connecting structure configured to connect said holder to said plate and to support said holder and said container means on said plate.

6. The system of claim 5 wherein said connecting structure comprises a peg on said plate and wherein said holder further comprises an opening configured to receive said peg to connect said holder to said plate.

7. The system of claim 4 further comprising a temperature control unit having a cavity configured to receive said plate holding said holder and said container therein and configured to control a temperature of said cavity to substantially uniformly at least one of thaw and freeze biopharmaceutical material held in said container means.

8. The system of claim 1 wherein said container is heat sealed to said holder.

9. The system of claim 1 wherein said container means comprises a first film and a second film connected to each other at a plurality of ends of said first film and said second film, and wherein said plurality of ends are non-separably connected to said holder.

10. The system of claim 9 wherein said holder comprises a first side and a second side and wherein said plurality of ends is received between said first side and said second side when said first side and said second side are connected to form said holder.

11. The system of claim 1 wherein said holder comprises a first side and a second side and further comprising a space between at least a portion of said first side and at least a portion of said second side, said holder being elastically deformable toward said space to inhibit damage of said container means in response to said case impacting an object.

12. The system of claim 1 wherein said holder further comprises a storage cavity configured to receive at least one conduit in fluid communication with an interior of said container means, said storage cavity having an opening to allow access from an exterior of said storage cavity.

13. The system of claim 1 wherein said container means comprises an interior having opposing interior surfaces which contact said biopharmaceutical material and avoid contact with each other when said container means is filled with biopharmaceutical material.

14. A method for use in freezing, storing, and thawing biopharmaceutical materials, the method comprising:

providing a flexible sterile container means for holding biopharmaceutical material therein;

fixedly connecting the container means to a holder more rigid than the container means, receiving the container means in a cavity of the holder and extending the holder along the perimeter of the container means; and

extending the container means between opposing sides of the holder defining an opening, the container means comprising a substantially smooth exterior surface extending between the opposing sides.

15. The method of claim 14 further comprising surrounding the container means with the holder and exposing the container means to an exterior of the holder through the opening.

16. The method of claim 14 further comprising connecting the holder to a supporting plate.

17. The method of claim 14 further comprising connecting a connecting structure of the supporting plate to a second connecting structure of the holder to support the holder and the container means on the supporting plate.

18. The method of claim 17 wherein the connecting structure comprises a peg and the second connecting structure comprises a cavity configured to receive said peg to connect the holder to the plate.

19. The method of claim 17 further comprising inserting the plate supporting the holder and the container means in a temperature control unit and at least one of thawing and freezing biopharmaceutical material held in the container means.

20. The method of claim 14 wherein the fixedly connecting comprises fixedly connecting the holder to the container means by heat sealing.

21. The system of claim 14 wherein the container means comprises a first film and a second film and further comprising connecting a plurality of ends of the first film and the second film to each other and non-separably connecting the first film and the second film to the holder.

22. The method of claim 21 further comprising connecting a first side and a second side of the holder to each other with the container means received between the first side and the second side.

23. The method of claim 22 wherein the holder comprises a first side and a second side and a space between at least a portion of the first side and the second side and further comprising elastically deforming at least one of the first side and the second side toward the space to inhibit damage of container means in response to the case impacting an object.

24. The method of claim 14 further comprising receiving at least one conduit in fluid communication with an interior of the container means in a storage cavity configured to receive the at least one conduit, the storage cavity having an opening to allow access from an exterior of the storage cavity.

25. The method of claim 14 further comprising filling the container means with biopharmaceutical material such that interior surfaces of an interior of the container means avoid contact with each.

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